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DC

#32

FROM SWAMP THING TO CLOAK AND DAGGER –
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BEST-SELLING SF AUTHOR –
ALFRED BESTER
REVEALS HIS COMICS ROOTS!

MARMADUKE'S MASTER –
BRAD ANDERSON
30 YEARS OF SYNDICATED SUCCESS!

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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UP FRONT

Rather than conduct a mere mini-interview with him, I've offered the mysterious new man on the masthead—**Mark Borax**—an opportunity to editorialize in my stead this month, and this is what he has to say...

—DAK

Alternatives

What do SOUTHERN KNIGHTS, MR. MONSTER, MS. TREE, OMAHA THE CAT DANCER, THE BADGER, TALES OF THE ANIVERSE and CAPTAIN CONFEDERACY have in common?

They're all alternatives, sure. Some are black-and-white, some color—but mainly, every one of these titles is just plain more *readable* than your average mainstream book. Sound like fightin' words? Maybe, but try them yourselves. I might never have, if I weren't managing editor of this magazine—and I wouldn't know what I was missing. So many books are sent here each week that I'm allowed to survey the market in a way I could never previously have afforded.

I confess, I'm still prejudiced — anything that falls outside the two Ruling Houses is immediately suspect of having a few loose staples—and they usually do, from clumsy transitions, awkward bits of dialogue, and curiously-torgued figures to loose threads which you don't find as frequently at the Big Guns. Despite this, most of these titles are just more fun to read —refreshingly different from the predictable plots and shopworn scripts of most mainstream books.

Not all the alternatives are blessed with the combination of market savvy and dumb luck necessary for survival—some won't be around next year at this time. So why not give them a shot while they're hot? Your interest just might make a difference, and I think you will be letting yourself in for a very pleasant surprise.

Mark Borax
Managing Editor

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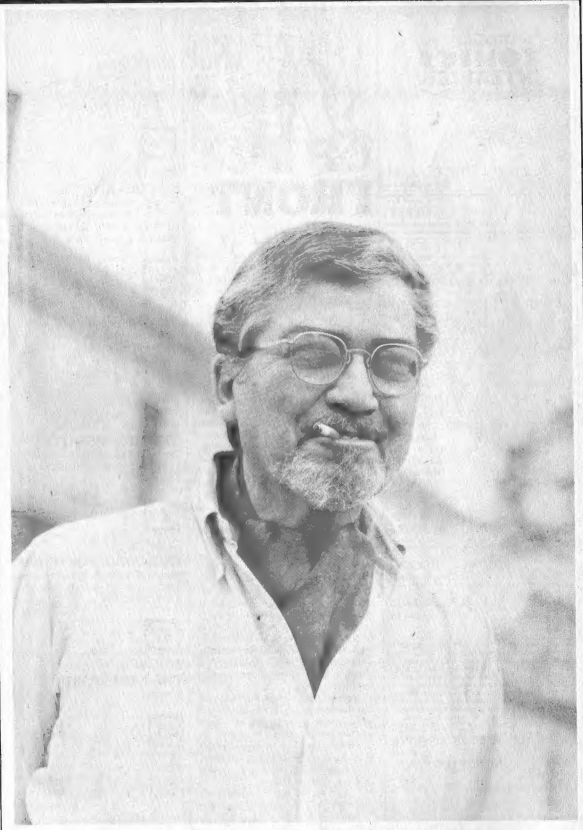
"A couple of nice dumb boys from



Cleveland had come up with SUPERMAN."

ALFRED BESTER

Alfred Bester has, in his time, been many things. Award-winning science-fiction author (and, brother, if you haven't read THE STARS MY DESTINATION and THE DEMOLISHED MAN yet, you best get down to your local paperback store or public library and have them on hand before you finish this interview!), mystery writer, scripter for radio shows (such as THE SHADOW and CHARLIE CHAN) and early television. Ten-year editor of HOLIDAY magazine.

He also wrote comic books. That's why he's here in COMICS INTERVIEW, folks.

Alfie — as he insisted I call him — was a mainstay DC scripter in the mid-to-late Forties at DC Comics, and batted out a few CAPTAIN MARVEL scripts as well. A lot of this period is covered in his autobiographical piece in HELL'S CARTOGRAPHERS, edited by Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison, in which he provides a funny stand-up routine about how an average super-hero script was concocted in the Golden Age. After reading that chapter, I was intrigued enough to conduct the following interview about his days in the four-color field, when he got the "bad writing" — his phrase — out of his system so that he could write the good stuff.

Even today, Alfred Bester isn't separate from the world of comics. There have been two incomplete — but famed — adaptations of THE STARS MY DESTINATION, one in comic-strip form by Australians Stanley and Rey Pitt, the other by Howard Chaykin in a truncated Byron Preiss project. We offer reproductions of both with this interview to contrast two different approaches in rendering the same material in illustrated format. Alfie was also given a credit line as "co-plotter" of THE JOKER #9 — though the first time he found that out was when I talked with him.

Thanks are due to Jim Steranko for helping set up this tete-a-tete. *And now, to center ring . . .*

LOU MOUGIN: *You got into comic books sometime between 1942 and 1947?*

ALFRED BESTER: Yes, around then. By a fluke, I started writing science fiction for Standard Magazines. Two of the editors I had were **Jack Schiff** and **Mort Weisinger**, and also **Murray Boltinoff.**

LOU: *I didn't know Boltinoff was an editor at Standard back then.*

ALFRED: His brother, Henry, was then a rather successful cartoonist.

LOU: *Yes, he ended up doing cartoons for DC all the way until the Sixties, I believe.*

ALFRED: Did he really? That I didn't know.

LOU: *Classics like SUPERTURTLE.*

ALFRED: *(Laughter.)* SUPERTURTLE, I like that. Anyway . . . a Galapagos turtle? Oh boy!

LOU: *I don't know . . . he was awfully big.*

ALFRED: Harry Donenfeld was a cockamamie printer who printed all kinds of fifth-rate magazines.

LOU: *Including pornography, too, I hear.*

ALFRED: Oh yeah, sure. As a matter of fact, in his original office, I came across a storeroom which had all these — it wasn't really hard porn — a magazine called SILK STOCKINGS. Big deal, you know, they posed in negligees, slips, with their stockings half rolled down. I guess that was a big thrill in those days. When these magazines went bust, owing him money, he continued to publish them, hoping to make his money back. A cartoon magazine — or magazines — went bust — didn't pay him. He continued — hoping to get his money back — end of part one. Part two, a couple of nice dumb boys from Cleveland or Cincinnati had come up with a thing called SUPERMAN.

LOU: *Jerry Seigel and Joe Schuster.*

ALFRED: Of course. And they had come to New York. They were peddling it all around, and couldn't sell it anywhere. They met **Donenfeld,** who needed material for his comic-book magazines — nobody knew how to write the goddamn things, much less draw them — so he bought it. And here's the joker . . .

Part three. On the back of his check was a big paragraph saying that if you cash this check, you sell all rights, title and interest in this feature to me, **Donenfeld.**

LOU: *They still do that at many publications right now.*

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"I never forgot Finger's generosity."

ALFRED: Yeah, but we're fighting 'em now. The rest is history — the project took off. **Donenfeld** found himself suddenly at the helm of an empire, and the poor schnooks went back to Cleveland or Cincinnati. A big deal. I think that, generously, he paid them four hundred dollars for the story.

LOU: *Which was a considerable amount.*

ALFRED: He continued at about that rate.

LOU: *It was a big amount to them at that time. And there was the thrill of getting published when you're a seventeen-year-old.*

ALFRED: Oh God, yes...

LOU: *Your first one was published when you were sixteen?*

ALFRED: No, I was much older. I was in my late teens or early twenties.

LOU: *I was just checking through this Jerry Bails' INDEX. I see your entry on CAPTAIN MARVEL for Fawcett in this list of writers. It has you circa 1942 to 1945. I guess that could be any story in that period?*

ALFRED: Yeah, sure.

LOU: *So you have any recollection of any specific stories?*

ALFRED: No.

LOU: *How did you start doing stories for Fawcett?*

ALFRED: Well, you know, that's a tough one to answer, Lou. Uh, I was a commercial writer, and you'd come in and say, "What do you need?" They'd say, you know, "We've been hitting magic too much, give us something with corrupt cops, or something like that." And you go home and you write one.

LOU: *Yeah, you go home and you write a "corrupt cop*

ALFRED: Well, no, that was against the rules back in those days.

LOU: *You couldn't write a corrupt cop story for DC Comics, right?*

ALFRED: No, cops could be dumb, but they had to be honest.

LOU: *You could have a dumb, honest cop who the super-hero had to outdo... but not be a corrupt cop, like the Raymond Chandler types...*

ALFRED: Right, exactly.

LOU: *A few minutes ago, I was going over the bit in HELL'S CARTOGRAPHERS when you were fictionalizing a plotting session with "Chuck Migg," a comics editor. You told me that "Chuck" wasn't any specific editor.*

ALFRED: No, no. He was just a composite.

LOU: *Since you seemed to be using a Batman villain, the thing that surprised me was that you said you never wrote BATMAN.*

ALFRED: Never, never, never, never, never.

LOU: *You* never *wrote BATMAN?*

ALFRED: I earned my own credits, I don't want any credits that I haven't earned.

LOU: *Did you make up Doctor Radium, the villain in there? The strange thing is — it sounds very much like the Doctor Radium who turned up in the BATMAN comic in the strip.*

ALFRED: I have a hunch that **Bob Kane** did it after me — I kind of have that feeling. I would never have stepped on his toes. I wouldn't do a thing like that.

LOU: *We established that you did do GREEN LANTERN. Somebody told me you wrote the Green Lantern oath. But you said flatly that you did not — you know, "In Brightest Day, In Blackest Night..."*

ALFRED: I did not like the oath. I thought it was pretty corny. Pretty tired. And when finally **Shelly Mayer** gave me complete control, I dumped it. I dumped Doiby Dickles.

LOU: *Ohhh!*

ALFRED: That's right.

LOU: *That would have been the best achievement I think anyone could have done on that strip!*

ALFRED: *(Laughter.)* Probably.

LOU: *Yeah. And I think I'm going to have a whole bunch of Doiby Dickles fans knocking on my door with flame throwers.*

ALFRED: With that cockamamie derby hat driving his cockamamie cab.

LOU: *Did it bother you that Green Lantern's ring wouldn't work on wood?*

ALFRED: Oh, Jesus, really? I didn't know that!

LOU: (Laughter.) *Yeah. Wow!*

ALFRED: I didn't know that at all! *(Laughter.)*

LOU: *This really gets me. You were the one writing it, and I'm telling you that it wouldn't work on wood.*

ALFRED: I'll put it in the next story.

LOU: *That's an idea!* (Laughter.) *Going back to the dark ages — Standard was not a branch of DC or National, was it?*

ALFRED: Standard Magazines? Not at all. **Weisinger** got hired away by **Donenfeld** at DC because he needed editors desperately. They needed writers desperately, so they brought me along with them.

LOU: *That was Schiff and Weisinger, right?*

ALFRED: Yeah.

LOU: *Okay. You said flatly in HELL'S*

Marvel's black-and-white version of Alf's post-holocaust story "Adam and no Eve." Art by Frank Robbins and Jim Mooney, script by Denny O'Neil.

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"I didn't want to be a PICASSO brush-

CARTOGRAPHERS — I guess that's the only way you can say anything in a book — flatly — that when the comic-book field exploded, the two Magi were lured away from Standard Magazines by the Superman group. You said there was a desperate need for writers to provide scenarios. You talked about the Saturday afternoon that, "Bill Finger took me in hand and gave me a lesson in comics scripting."

ALFRED: I've never forgotten that — it was the most generous thing in the world. He laid the whole thing out for me in terms of a thirteen-page story. He did it page by page, panel by panel. You know, it took a couple of hours and, of course, I absorbed it eagerly, because it was the first chance I had ever had to make any money as a writer. This was my big opportunity. He was a good guy — so generous to me. After all, I was a potential rival. Yet he did it — which is why, ever since, I've always tried to do the same thing for other writers. I remember, after I finally broke in with the help of Bill and started writing regularly for them, him taking my wife and my mother-in-law to dinner at, of all places, Schraft's in New York. It was kind of a middle-class posh restaurant. I said to my wife proudly, with kind of a mad glow in my eyes, "Darling, do you realize from now on I can make... I can make *eighty dollars* a week?"

LOU: *That was pretty good money back in those day, I guess.*

ALFRED: Let's discuss the period just past the Depression, if you have the time.

LOU: *I can turn the tape over.*

ALFRED: Okay, you go ahead. I'll get a cigarette.

LOU: *Okay.* (Pause.) *He's getting the cigarette...* (More pause.) *He's still getting the cigarette... You could make yourself a sandwich...* (Mental pause.) *The boy stood on the burning deck, and his feet were full of blisters... I'm turning this thing off.* (End of pause.)

ALFRED: I'm back.

LOU: *Right!*

ALFRED: Low, when my wife and I first got married, and set out on our own, we had nothing. My Mom and Dad and her mother helped us with a few bucks now and then. It was never Poverty Row. It was not rich or anything like that — but at least we lived very modestly, and decently.

LOU: *It was comfortable middle class, in other words?*

ALFRED: No, it was not quite comfortable — it was making-ends-meet middle class. Certainly not Greenwich Village or anything like that. I rather think, Lou, the Village-types, the Poverty Row types, *wanted* their poverty — it's not forced on them, I think they want it. These are delusions of — what can I say — twentieth-century poverty.

There's another aspect of it, too. There's a question — now, this is very delicate — it's a question of class. Now, I was excessively well-educated. You know, three universities and all that sort of stuff. Strictly Ivy League and that bit. I was not about to put up with the Village and living in a garret. Not for me. My wife, the same thing — well-educated. You know, coming from a family that went to Carnegie Hall twice a week, and to the opera. Class, class, class. I'm not saying that we were better class, I'm just saying that our *tastes* did not lean that way. I didn't want to be a **Picasso** brushing off cockroaches.

LOU: *So the comic books and the other writing assignments helped you get away from that kind of lifestyle. You told me there was no such thing as a DC Bullpen or anything like that back then.*

ALFRED: Not to my knowledge, at all. No, there was one guy who used to write, I guess he was kind of a one-man bullpen. He was a terrible drunk — he was the son of a very famous radio announcer, used to announce the Detroit Symphony concerts. His wife used to have to come down to the office every Thursday or Friday, whatever it was, to pick up his check. If she didn't, he would take it and blow it in one wild, wild afternoon and night. Many's the time I had to go out and look for him.

You must have heard the story of **Joe Schuster** in Florida?

LOU: *He was picked up for vagrancy — he said he was the artist for SUPERMAN. Somebody said, "Well, why don't you draw Superman?" He did, and they dropped the charges.*

ALFRED: Aw, go on. That's not the true story. I'll give it to you straight. I was in

The first clash of two Golden Age greats: Green Lantern and Solomon Grundy, drummed up on a rush job by Alf.

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ing off cockroaches . . . Not for me."

© 1942 Detective Comics, Inc.

the office at the time. A phone call comes in from the Sheriff from Miami Beach. He said — I can't do his dialect — "Is this the place that publishes a magazine called SUPERMAN?"

"Yeah."

"We got a guy down here who claims he's Superman."

LOU: *Who claims he is Superman?*

ALFRED: Yeah.

LOU: *Oh, Lord.*

ALFRED: What had happened was, Joe was a left-handed artist, that's bad enough. They're all crazy. They're as bad as Southpaw pitchers. He'd gotten his first big money — gone down on a bus to Miami. He went over the ferry, or whatever the hell it was that you took from Miami to Miami Beach, and was walking up to the mansions. In those days there were still beautiful private mansions on the beach, not just hotels. He was looking at them, minding his own business — just staring at them in awe. Some of the servants and residents saw him, got a little alarmed, and phoned the police. The cops came in a patrol car and picked him up. He got rattled, and he said, "I'm okay, I'm okay. I'm Superman, I'm Superman." Pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket, tied with a shoelace, to prove that he was legitimate. We had to send a guy down to get him and pick him up.

LOU: *I bet the editor had a* long *session with him after he did that.* (Laughter.) *He said he was Superman?*

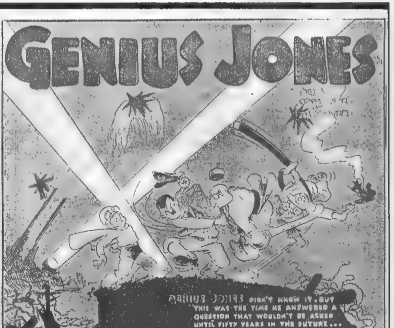
ALFRED: "I'm Superman, I'm Superman . . ." *(Laughter.)* He'd deny it today. Hell, I remember it. Those were crazy days — we were all crazy.

LOU: *The first Solomon Grundy story you did, you said, was a rush job for Shelly Mayer?*

ALFRED: I was down at the 23rd Street office — spending time, or just klunking around — I loved that office 'cause I loved the neighborhood. So I used to drop in. He called me and said, "Alf," he said, "we're thirteen pages short for the so-and-so issue, and I've got to get a script to the artist by tomorrow morning. For God's sakes can you come up with something?" And I went home, to my luxurious mansion. *(Laughter.)* and sat and thought. Actually, do you know what the inspiration for it was? It was a story by **Ted Sturgeon** called "It."

LOU: *So "It" — which inspired several other comics characters — inspired Sol Grundy, too!*

ALFRED: Yep. I told Ted about it. I said, "Ted, I'm very grateful to you, and if you want a piece of my check" — it was, like, a hundred and nineteen dollars — I said, "You're welcome to it. But I want you to know that I did extrapolate what you had done with 'It' — I think that you should have developed 'It' further."


GENIUS JONES
THERE IS NOW A NO-HANDED UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, TWO INCIDENTAL HISTORY PROFESSORS,
I'LL BE DAMNED IF I'LL BE ASKED ANY MORE QUESTIONS!
I'M GOING TO GET A CUP OF COFFEE. TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED TO THE

Genius Jones — the non-hero hero, based on Alf's son. Art by Stan Kaye.

LOU: *The best line I've heard on Solomon Grundy was one that Roy Thomas wrote last year, in a comic which he used Sol Grundy in. One of the super-type kids he was fighting took a look at him and said, "That's funny, he doesn't look Jewish."* (Laughter.)

ALFRED: That's great. It reminds me of a story that took place during the occupation in Japan. A Jewish guy, a G.I., heard that there was a Japanese temple — a synagogue. One Saturday he went to it. And there it was — this synagogue full of Japanese Orthodox Jews — he was fascinated by it. And after the service was over everybody left except the Rabbi. He went up to the Rabbi and introduced himself. He said, "I'm a G.I., and I'm Jewish. I wanted to congratulate you." The Jap looked at him and said, "Funny, you no rook Jewish." *(Laughter.)* A classic old story.

LOU: *What was your favorite comic strip?*

ALFRED: My favorite really was GENIUS JONES.

LOU: *GENIUS JONES — you created that one, right?*

ALFRED: Yeah, actually, I *had* to love it.

LOU: *What were the circumstances behind his creation?*

ALFRED: DC was hungry for features — they were dropping some that didn't work. THE STAR-SPANGLED KID and STRIPESY, you know, I wrote him, incidentally, in my time — and STRIPESY. How about that? Well, DC was dropping them, and looking for features to fill in — short ones — little four-pagers, or six-pagers. I said I would take a crack at it. I went home and put together this non-hero hero, and showed it to **Mort Weisinger** and **Jack Schiff** and **Murray Boltinoff**. They

WHEN IS SHE GOING TO TELL HIM THAT THOSE CONCRETE ALLIGATORS WERE AFTER HER?
MATT?
HE... IT LOOKS LIKE HE DISAPPEARED!
AT LEAST I'M UNFORTUNATE BECAUSE I'M SO REMOTE
AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE TO TURN MYSELF IN, I'M NOT GOING BACK!
BUT YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME!
I CAN'T TAKE THIS MUCH LONGER!
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"I'm naturally hysteric, myself!"

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said, "Well, maybe . . . " They weren't sure. I showed it to **Stan Kaye**, who did a couple of sketches, which was so sweet. It was really his doing that they dug it. So, we put together some stories.

My wife, Faye, and I remember living in a huge brownstone mansion in the middle Eastside of Manhattan. We used to give huge Christmas parties. We gave one that Stan came to. He was very sweet. Instead of an angel on the top of the tree, he did a lovely watercolor of Genius Jones to stick up there. The character is my *son*, as it were — so, of course, it has to be my favorite.

LOU: *There have been two adaptations in comics of Gully Foyle, from THE STARS MY DESTINATION. Reg and Stan Pitt, two Australian fellows, did a Gully Foyle strip.*

ALFRED: The Australians handled it purely by correspondence, and I gave the go-ahead. That's all I knew about it. I was very sorry to hear that they never sold it, because the repros look like beautiful artwork, very nice. The other guy who did STARS MY DESTINATION, in that great huge art book, went bust. I was not at all surprised, because people put too much money into it. It was a beautiful production, and nobody's buying beautiful production these days.

LOU: *That was Byron Preiss. There were some people trying to make a last ditch effort to raise enough money to get the second volume published.*

ALFRED: I'm glad they didn't, I really am.

LOU: *It never did come out.*

ALFRED: Byron is in touch with me very much now. He's on a new *schtick*. He wants me to write stories for computer games.

LOU: *Are you going to be doing anything like that?*

ALFRED: It's not my style. I am a straight-line, single-line writer. What Byron needs are stories with alternatives, hundreds of alternatives. This is not for me.

LOU: *Has DEMOLISHED MAN by any chance been made into a computer game?*

ALFRED: Not that I know of.

LOU: *You know, FAHRENHEIT 451, and I think a Heinlein or two, have been adapted for that format — and I think some of Asimov's have, too.*

ALFRED: FAHRENHEIT is a single-line story, so that'd work all right. But, of course, all the books make for wonderful alternatives

LOU: *Give us some background on the two major early novels that you did, which are STARS and DEMOLISHED MAN.*

ALFRED: Well, you know, Lou, I was trained on NICK CARTER, THE SHADOW, CHARLIE CHAN. I was trained as a mystery writer . . .

LOU: *And those were some of the first successful science-fiction/mystery novels. In both the Telepath Society and Gully Foyle, they experience some super-human abilities — discounting Gully's super-speed which he acquired mechanically*

ALFRED: This results from two things. First, you have to have your hero — you've got to give him a different quality. He's got to have something extra in the first place. In the second place, part of a deep belief I have is the fact that men, women, children — whatever, you name it — have got tremendous potential which they have never yet tapped. And it takes a crisis to bring it out. Each of these characters was subjected to a crisis which didn't make them superhuman — it just brought out the qualities that all of us have.

LOU: *In the first part of STARS, the ability to Jaunte, or teleport, is tested. When the scientist is the first one to Jaunte and is put in the water tank, they bust the faucet. He has to Jaunte to get out of it. So that would be the stress situation which brings out his potential . . .*

ALFRED: Right. I like that — "stress situation" is the expression I should have used. I think it's rather interesting to see we are living in tremendous stress situations. There

Gully Foyle
By ALFRED BESTER & STANLEY PITT ASSOCIATES
* MAROONED FOR 170 DAYS ABOARD THE WAR-WRECK SS NOMAD GULLY FOYLE IS AT LAST PROVIDED OFFICIAL WITH 18 VORGA, A MASTER SPACE NOMAD ACKNOWLEDGES HIS DISTRESS SIGNALS AND DRAWS ALONGSIDE
WHAT'S THIS?!
THE SHIP WAS ALONGSIDE IN A MOMENT, PASSING IN A SECOND'S DARKENING IN A THIRD. . .
THE FASTER HAD GROANED HIM. THE ANGEL HAD ABANDONED HIM. HE STARED IN CHRIST
YOU PAVE ME BY. YOU LET ME DIE, VORGA. VORGA T-330 NO. I GET OUT OF HERE. WE I FOLLOW YOU VORGA I FIND YOU, VORGA. I PAY YOU BACK VORGA I KILL YOU, VORGA!
HE LEAPED TO THE KLAXON JAWS, AND SLAPPED BUTTON AFTER BUTTON WILDLY. DISTRESS BEACONS LANDING BEACONS AND CLEARANCE — LIGHT BURST FROM THE HULL OF THE NOMAD IN A MADNESS OF WHITE RED AND GREEN LIGHT, PULSING, READING AND VORGA T-330 PASSED SILENTLY UNFLINCHINGLY. STERN JETS FLARING AS IT ACCELERATED ON ITS SUNWARD COURSE AWAY
VORGA, I KILL YOU!
SO IN FIVE SECONDS, HE WAS BORN, HE LIVED AND HE DIED. AFTER THIRTY YEARS OF EXISTENCE AND SIX MONTHS OF TORTURE, GULLY FOYLE WAS DEAD. BUT THE MAN THAT HE WOULD BE, THE MAN THAT HE TALKED TO THE LOOP IN THE PSYCHE AND THE DOOR WAS OPENED WIDE. WHAT EMERGED REMAINED THE COMMON MAN FOREVER
THE ACID OF PURE RAGE THROUGH HIM EATING AWAY THE DUAL PATIENCE AND SLUGGISHNESS THAT HAD MADE A CURSE OF GULLY FOYLE. PRECIPITATING A CHAIN OF REACTIONS THAT WOULD MAKE AN INFERNAL MACHINE OF GULLY FOYLE — HE WAS DEDICATED
NEXT WEEK THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

Australian adaptation of THE STARS MY DESTINATION from a 1967 issue of DR. WEIRD, a Texas publication with a print run of 500.

"I turned my best comic-book stories

It was an age of freaks, monsters, and grotesques. All the world was mishapen in marvelous and malevolent ways. The Classicists and Romantics who despised it were blind to the cold fact that progress stems from the clashing merger of antagonistic extremes. Classicists and Romantics alike were unaware that the Solar System was on the verge of a human explosion.

It is against this seething background that the history of Gulliver Foyle begins.

are two reactions to it. Some of us fight — and I'm a fighter, what can you do? But others of us withdraw completely into, well, into the Village.

LOU: *Or into fantasy.*

ALFRED: Or drugs. Which is okay with me. Don't kid yourself, I'm no prude. I've tried them all. It's just that I get no charge from them, 'cause I'm naturally hysteric, myself. *(Laughter.)* Since we just wrapped up my belief in the potential qualities of man, and you said that stress situations are necessary to bring them out.

In the first place, **William James** once said that man lives so far beneath his full potential that it's only in a crisis or, as you say, in a stress situation, that he reaches one-hundred percent of his capacity. I mentioned to a friend what a shame it is that we can't operate constantly at one-hundred percent of our full capacity. And he said, yeah, and we'd all be dead at forty. *(Laughter.)*

But in the second place, there's such a thing, I think, as a biological monitor which says, "Slow down, baby. Just rest a bit. Take it easy . . ." And then you can move on later. But you need a rest period.

LOU: *I was going to ask you about the radio scripting. How did you get into it?*

ALFRED: My wife was working as a radio actress when I was writing *squinkas* — comics. There was a new show that came on as a summer replacement called CHARLIE CHAN. She worked the show. She came to me and said, "The producer of the show" — **Chick Vincent**, his name was — "is desperate for scripts. All they have is one script which sold the show for a summer replacement — that's all they've got." They had thirteen weeks on their hands, and didn't know what the hell to do. So I said, "All right, I'll take a crack at it. Bring me a script so I know how to type 'em, how long, what format . . ." She did. And I stole a couple of what I thought were my best comic-book stories, and turned them into scripts. And **Chick Vincent** bought 'em both! They called me in: I ended up as the writer on the show — the whole show! As a matter of fact, it was continued by NBC as a regular show. I ended up as the director and producer and writer on it. I had the whole *schmear*. It was great. Lots of fun. Because, like comic books, I didn't really take it seriously. The whole trouble with me is I don't even take myself seriously. We were having a ball in the '40s.

LOU: *It was a completely different attitude, as opposed to everybody being hyper-serious, the way they are about comic books nowadays?*

ALFRED: Yes. Anyway, from there I went onto NICK CARTER, THE SHADOW, THE SECRET SERVICE — you name 'em,

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into CHARLIE CHAN radio scripts."

I can't remember — oh, HERCULE POIROT MYSTERY OF THE WEEK How about that?

LOU: *The old Agatha Christie character?*

ALFRED: And me, who has no French at all — you should have seen me trying to fake a French accent. *(Laughter.)*

LOU: *You just do a "zee" for every...*

ALFRED: Yeah! *(Laughter.)* When in doubt, you write Monsieur or Monsira.

LOU: *Or "Sacre bleu." Everybody knows that.*

ALFRED: Yeah That's always a great one. I've got a story to tell you about that. In the next door studio to us, they were doing ELLERY QUEEN. These were closed mysteries. The boys who wrote the scripts would not let the actors see the solution of the mystery until just before they went on the air — because they felt that if they knew what the ending was, it would affect their performance How about that dementia?

LOU: *That sounds like when DALLAS filmed three different endings to "Who Shot J.R.?" and wouldn't let anybody know which one it was going to be.*

ALFRED: Perhaps the writers themselves didn't know.

LOU: *Probably not, until they checked out which one would have the best audience appeal. On THE SHADOW, you were writing it when James LeCurto was The Shadow?*

ALFRED: Wait a minute The first Shadow was **Carlos Ortega**, and then came **Bret Morrison**, and then there was a guy that Mutual brought in because the movie companies were trying to push him real hard, to turn him into a star. The world's non-actor of the time. What the hell was his name? He married **Shirley Temple**. He was a no-talent. That's when I quit — I was finished with the show.

LOU: *You were out of comics from about 1947 — you were getting into radio and TV, and then HOLIDAY Magazine, which let you get a whole lot of good travelling in, I would imagine?*

ALFRED: Oh, yeah! I was very happy there, because the interesting thing is — the reason they brought me in — I was writing so many pieces for them, as a freelance independent, it was cheaper for them to hire me. So they put me on salary, on staff. I was the second in command. It was a small intimate group. We had a marvelous time putting the magazine together. We all got along beautifully. My boss and I, very often we would ask each other's permission to do something. He would ask me, "Alf, is it okay if I do such and such?" and I'd say, "Yeah, go ahead." And vice versa. Somebody once said to me, "You weren't working — it was a goddamn country club!" I guess it was. Travelling on an expense ac-

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"I'm sitting in Sardi's with Mel Brooks."

count is absolutely fabulous. Not so much because of the money, but because back then, the magazine was rather important. It was the clout the magazine had which gave me *entre* to everything. Since I am a confirmed serendipidist I was able, in any city around the world, to just wander and peek into a shop, and go in and show my card. They'd show me how to make pretzels, or whatever it was that I was curious about.

LOU: *Yes, I remember that old ad, "So you are from HOLIDAY. You must meet the actor, you must go backstage, you must do everything . . ." I think they ran that in the mid-Sixties, with Japanese Kabuki masks, something like that. I imagine you found stuff in your travels to work into the stories you were doing?*

ALFRED: Well, nothing goes to waste, you know. I have a "gimmick book" that's about four-hundred pages long. And everything is listed in it. *(Laughter.)* You know, people say, "Where do you get your ideas for a story?" What can I say? I've got more ideas than I can write in a lifetime!

LOU: *Getting back to the old Forties stuff — it was a passing phase, but you had some fun in it?*

ALFRED: Yes, learning my craft. Getting writing out of my system — because, God knows, we have a lot of bad writing to get rid of.

LOU: *Well, it appears that a lot of people got rid of bad writing — like Otto Binder.*

ALFRED: Is **Otto Binder** still alive?

LOU: *No, he died in the late Sixties, I believe.*

ALFRED: A friend of mine who I met at a convention said, "I've just come up from down South where I visited **Nelson Bundt**." I said, "**Nelson Bundt**, is he still alive?" My friend burst out laughing, and said, "When I told him that I would be seeing you at this convention, he said exactly the same thing!" *(Laughter.)* So I'm very careful now about, "Is he still alive?"

LOU: *Getting back to comics, you said you didn't even know anything about THE JOKER issue which in 1976 or 1977 listed you as contributor/co-plotter Alfred Bester, or something like that.*

ALFRED: I'm damned if I know why.

LOU: *It was written by a fellow named Marty Pasko — back when the old Batman villain, The Joker, had his own comic book for a little while.*

ALFRED: You know something? I always visited **Julie Schwartz** — I loved him. It's possible that I made some suggestions which I do not think deserved a credit line, but if they wanted to credit me, okay

LOU: *I think it was more like they wanted to say, "Hey, Alfred Bester helped plot this thing!"* (Laughter.)?

ALFRED: You mean my name would help sell it?

LOU: *I think they were* hoping *it would.*

ALFRED: As I keep saying, we all help each other out.

LOU: *In an earlier conversation you mentioned that your pet peeve is "civilians" — amateurs who try to give ideas to professionals.*

ALFRED: What I hate is not civilians *per se* — I hate civilians who try to get into the act. And *you* must have been up against this as I am all the time. One story: I'm sitting in Sardi's bar with **Mel Brooks**. Now Mel is a comedy writer, he knows 'em all. Would you believe a civilian comes and starts to tell him a funny story?

LOU: *Starts* trying *to tell him a funny story?*

ALFRED: Very polite, very polite. But I saw the look on Mel's face, and he saw the look on mine. And after the civilian left, we both broke up, burst out laughing. I said, "It happens to you all the time, huh, Mel?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, they're always coming up to me, and saying, 'Got a great story — all you've got to do is write it.'" Now *that's* the civilians. I'm complaining about — get the hell out of our act!

LOU: *Have you ever read Harlan Ellison's story about being interviewed on a radio show? He gave the listeners a chance to call in with SF story ideas. He says, "Oh, I'll try to turn these things into . . ." It ends with him almost dissolving into a mass of jelly on the air . . . trying to put these terrible ideas into a storyline.*

ALFRED: I really loathe that — leave us alone, for Chrissakes. Buy our books and leave us alone!

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"I hadn't the faintest idea of how to write

© 1942 Detective Comics, Inc.

IT ALL BEGAN (THE ANCIENT BEGGAR SAID) WHEN MARY BROWN ASKED GENIUS JONES TO TAKE HER HOME...
GENIUS, WILL YOU ESCORT ME HOME FROM WORK TODAY ?
I'D LOVE TO, MARY! ERR... FOR THE RIDE ON THE FERRY, YOU UNDERSTAND..
ACH ! CHENIUS CHONES !
VE ARE CHUST IN TIME !
OH-OH CUSTOMERS, WAIT A MINUTE, MARY.
VE HAFF AN IMPORDTANDT KVESTION TO ASK YOU
JA ! YOU MUST TELL US VHAT HAPPENED TO THE NAZI SUB-MARINE U-39. VHERE CAN VE FIND HER ?

When comics were comics . . . A 1942 issue of ADVENTURE featuring GENIUS JONES.

ALF BESTER says . . .

"I'm told that some science fiction readers complain that nothing is known about my private life," says Alfred Bester, "I'm reluctant to talk about myself because I prefer to listen to others."

Well, in the following anecdote, you'll get a chance to listen to Alf describe the exasperating task of selling a Golden Age comics editor a new idea. The anecdote is excerpted from HELL'S CARTOGRAPHERS, a British collection of short autobiographies of top science-fiction writers, published in 1975, including DAMON KNIGHT, FREDERIK POHL, ROBERT SILVERBERG and others

Being brash and the worst kind of intellectual snob, I said privately to **Weisinger** that I wasn't much impressed by these writers who were supplying most of the science fiction for the magazines, and asked him why they received so many assignments. He explained, 'They may never write a great story but they never write a bad one. We know we can depend on them.' Having recently served my time as a magazine editor I now understand exactly what he meant.

When the comic book explosion burst, my two magi were lured away from Standard Magazines by the Superman Group. There was a desperate need for writers to provide scenarios (**Wellman** nicknamed them 'squinkas') for the artists, so **Weisinger** and **Schiff** drafted me as one of their writers. I hadn't the faintest idea of how to write a comic book script, but one rainy Saturday afternoon **Bill Finger**, the star comics writer of the time, took me in hand and gave me, a potential rival, an incisive, illuminating lecture on the craft. I still regard that as a high point in the generosity of one colleague to another.

I wrote comics for three or four years with increasing expertise and success. Those were wonderful days for a novice. Squinkas were expanding, there was a constant demand for stories, you could write three and four a week and experiment while learning your craft. The scripts were usually an odd combination of science fiction and 'Gangbusters'. To give you some idea of what they were like, here's a typical script conference with an editor I'll call Chuck Migg, dealing with a feature I'll call 'Captain Hero'. Naturally, both are fictitious. The dialogue isn't.

'Now listen,' Migg says, 'I called you down because we got to do something about Captain Hero.'

'What's your problem?'

'The book is closing next week and we're thirteen pages short. That's a whole lead story. We got to work one out now.'

'Any particular slant?'

'Nothing special, except maybe two things. We got to be original and we got to be realistic. No more fantasy.'

'Right.'

'So give.'

'Wait a minute, for Christ's sake. Who d'you think I am, **Saroyan**?'

Two minutes of intense concentration, then Migg says, 'How about this? A mad scientist invents a machine for making people go fast. So the crooks steal it and hop themselves up. Get it? They move so fast they can rob a bank in a split second.'

'No.'

'We open a splash panel showing money and jewelry disappearing with wiggly lines and — Why no?'

'It's a steal from **H. G. Wells**.'

'But it's still original.'

'Anyway, it's too fantastic. I thought you said we were going to be realistic.'

'Sure I said realistic but that don't mean we can't be imaginative. What we have to—'

'Wait a minute. Hold the phone.'

'Got a flash?'

'Maybe. Suppose we begin with a guy making some kind of experiment. He's a scientist but not mad. This is a straight, sincere guy.'

'Gotcha. He's making an experiment for the good of humanity. Different narrative hook.'

'We'll have to use some kind of rare earth metal, cerium, maybe, or —'

'No, let's go back to radium. We ain't used it for three issues.'

'All right, radium. The experiment is a success. He brings a dead dog back to life with his radium serum.'

'I'm waiting for the twist.'

'The serum gets into his blood. From a lovable scientist he turns into a fiend.'

At this point Migg takes fire. 'I got it! I

comics until Bill Finger showed me."

GENIUS JONES' SUSPICIONS WERE AROUSED...THEN CALMED!
HMMM, WHY DO YOU WANT TO KNOW? YOU WOULDN'T BE SPIES, WOULD YOU?
ACH, NO! VE ARE CHEE-MEN. OUR ACCENTS ARE PART OF OUR DISGUISE. VE NEED YOUR HELP TO TRAP DIS U-BOAT!
YOU'LL HAVE TO EXCUSE ME, MARY. THESE MEN NEED MY HELP.
SO DO I! WHY DO YOU THINK I WANTED YOU TO SEE ME HOME? IT'S BECAUSE I'M BEING FOLLOWED!
FOLLOWED?
YES...EVERY TIME I TAKE THE FERRY TO AND FROM WORK, A BENT IRON PIPE FOLLOWS ME THROUGH THE WATER!

got it! We'll make like King Midas. This doc is a sweet guy. He's just finished an experiment that's gonna bring eternal life to mankind. So he takes a walk in his garden and smells a rose. *Bloxie!* The rose dies. He feeds the birds. *Wham!* The birds plotz. So how does Captain Hero come in?'

'Well, maybe we can make it Jekyll and Hyde here. The doctor doesn't want to be a walking killer. He knows there's a rare medicine that'll neutralize the radium in him. He has to steal it from hospitals and that brings Captain Hero around to investigate.'

'Nice human interest.'

'But here's the next twist. The doctor takes a shot of the medicine and thinks he's safe. Then his daughter walks into the lab and when he kisses her she dies. The medicine won't cure him any more.'

By now Migg is in orbit. 'I got it! I got it! First we run a caption: IN THE LONELY LABORATORY A DREADFUL CHANGE TORTURES DR. — whatever his name is — HE IS NOW DR. RADIUM!!! Nice name, huh?'

'Okay.'

'Then we run a few panels showing him turning green and smashing stuff and he screams: THE MEDICINE CAN NO LONGER SAVE ME! THE RADIUM IS EATING INTO MY BRAIN! I'M GOING MAD, HA-HA-HA!!! How's that for real drama?'

'Great.'

'Okay. That takes care of the first three pages. What happens with Dr. Radium in the next ten?'

'Straight action finish. Captain Hero tracks him down. He traps Captain Hero in something lethal. Captain Hero escapes and traps Dr. Radium and knocks him off a cliff or something.'

'No. Knock him into a volcano.'

'Why?'

'So we can bring Dr. Radium back for a sequel. He really packs a wallop. We could have him walking through walls and stuff on account of the radium in him.'

'Sure.'

'This is gonna be a great character, so don't rush the writing. Can you start today? Good. I'll send a messenger up for it tomorrow.'

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THE G-MEN WERE KEYED TO A FEVER PITCH BY MARY'S ANNOUNCEMENT!
ACH...DOT MUST BE A PERISCOPE!
DONNERWETTER... UND DOT MUST BE DER U-39!

QUICK! YOU MUST COME MIT US! VE VILL DRIVE YOU TO DER FERRY IN OUR CAR UND VE VILL TRAP DER BOAT!
HEY!
LET ME GET INTO MY ANSWERMAN CLOTHES!

"I was 15 when I began selling cartoons

BRAD ANDERSON

Every writer knows it's harder to condense than expand, and one of the toughest tasks for a writer is to get that laugh in three panels or less. Strips like MARMADUKE are skim read in under ten seconds by most readers, so we tend to take for granted the herculean effort which goes into composing the few scant brushstrokes — and even fewer words, with just the right hook to snag the laugh. Like most great pros, Brad Anderson manages to make it all look so easy, even after 30 years at the drawing board

SHEL DORF: *Brad, thinking back to your earliest childhood — when did you first become enamored with comics?*

BRAD ANDERSON: From the very earliest — I must have been pretty young, because I'd get ahold of the comics section and have someone read the comics to me. It was even before I knew how to read that I was interested in the comics

SHEL: *What city was this?*

BRAD: Well, I was living in western New York and the major city there — which is not a major city — was Jamestown, New York

SHEL: *Oh, Lucille Ball's hometown!*

BRAD: **Lucille Ball**'s hometown. She lived in Cellarond, and that borders a suburb of Jamestown. And there was a big beautiful amusement park there

SHEL: *Did they have a lot of newspapers in Jamestown?*

BRAD: When I was a kid, they had a morning paper and an afternoon paper. Later, they combined to the one paper. We also had papers from Buffalo, Pittsburg, and Cleveland that were distributed through the area. On Sundays we'd have Sunday comics pages galore! Yeah, it was great

SHEL: *Did you draw from these comics?*

BRAD: Oh, I had a pad and pencil — I always liked to work with a pencil, even when I was a little kid. And I didn't know how to draw *words*, but I knew how to draw characters

SHEL: *How did your childhood interest in cartooning develop into professional art?*

BRAD: When I was in high school, I looked at magazine cartoons and I thought, "Gee, I could do that."So I started drawing up some inked-up cartoons and I sent them off to various magazines. I was interested in aviation, so my first were aviation cartoons. The first magazine I sent them to was FLYING, then there was FLYING ACES, and there was SKY-something — there were about six or seven different magazines in that category.

SHEL: *Do you remember what they paid?*

BRAD: Oh God, I thought I was going to get rich. I didn't have a car, I used my sister's bicycle. I sent these cartoons off, and I got a letter back. The editor said they were going to take ten of 'em. And I thought,

to magazines. Movies were a quarter."

After 30 years Brad Anderson reveals the secret of MARMADUKE's success.

"In the '50s or late '40s, the gag strip

Marmaduke
by
BRAD ANDERSON
FLOP
SIGH
OUT OF THE KITCHEN!
GET OFF MY HOMEWORK!
YOU'RE MESSING UP MY INCOME TAX ... BEAT IT!
HEY! GET OUTA HERE!
SIGH
DRAGON'S GUMY
Barbara Nicholson's German shepherd-retriever mix of Indels, in needed treatment for an ear infection. During a visit to the vet, she laid upon the floor with all 4 feet in the air and played dead hoping the vet would decide she was too far gone. That didn't work. So the next visit, she laid down on the floor, covered her eyes with her paws and began
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"Boy, if they pay a hundred dollars apiece, I'll make some money!" (*Laughter.*) "Even if they pay fifty, I could go down and buy that nice little used Ford, or whatever's down there." And so, I went down and picked out the car and everything. I was already waiting for that check. I waited about sixty days, and the check came through. It was for two and a half dollars per cartoon.

SHEL: *Oooooooh. . .* (Laughter.)

BRAD: Listen, it still paid for a date — we ate out. A hamburger then only cost a quarter, a milkshake was a quarter, and you'd get into the movies for a quarter, so I still made out pretty good.

SHEL: *At what age were you a professional cartoonist then?*

BRAD: Probably about fifteen. I was fifteen — selling to magazines.

SHEL: *A good start. What do you think of our current scene? Do kids get the same kind of enjoyment from the Sunday funnies — or has television taken over?*

BRAD: I have an opportunity once in awhile to talk to various groups — Rotary, Kiwanis. I was over in Santa Fe the other day, and I gave a talk to Rotary. I said, "Probably not too many of you in here read the comics anymore," and you should have heard the protest that I got from that audience! Older men, some were retired, and quite a contingent of the younger businessmen in the community — they all had their hands up. "We read the comics." I said, "That's one thing that I wanted to find out. I've heard that comics are more popular *now* than they ever have been in history. I wondered if that was really true or not." So, it was certainly evident there.

A lot of people come up to me when they find out what I do and say, "Well I enjoy your comic." Then, they go on to tell me the various comics they like. Everybody seems to have different favorites. One thing I have noticed is that very, very few people tell me that they read *all* the comics. They have their favorites, and they just read their favorites. People are very selective. They don't watch every television show, they don't read every page in the newspaper. If they buy a magazine, many of them read just sections of the magazine — they don't look through the whole magazine.

SHEL: *What's your opinion about the adventure strip?*

BRAD: I like it. I like the continuity adventure strip — some of them . . . some of them, I lost interest in. For some reason they just lost their appeal. But some, I just can't leave alone — I have to keep following them. STEVE CANYON is number one on the list. I really want to find out what's going to happen from day to day. Back in the '50s or late '40s, the real gag strip dropped out of favor. Everything was a story strip. .

SHEL: *That's right around the time they changed BIG CHIEF WAHOO to an adventure strip.*

BRAD: I think ninety percent of the strips in the paper in those days were adventure, story strips.

SHEL: *Even ARCHIE had little continued adventures.*

BRAD: Uh-huh. There was a continuity. Then, all of a sudden, television appeared on the scene, and the newspapers — without you even realizing it — began to drop the story strips, replacing them with the comic strips. The real *comic* strip, again.

SHEL: *Must have been a series of editors who felt that the continued strip had met its match — that television could do it better.*

BRAD: Perhaps.

SHEL: *As a kid did you read comic books?*

BRAD: Oh, yeah. The first comic book I ever read was a bunch of reprints of BLONDIE. One of the kids of the gang I hung around with had been down to the grocery store. They had magazines there. He came running back and said, "Hey, you'll never believe what they've got down there!" And I said, "What?" And he said, "A comic book!" We ran back down, and for ten cents you could buy a comic book of BLONDIE. By the end of the year, they had a whole rack full of comic books of other strips that were reprints. They started selling originals later on.

SHEL: *Did you have any favorites?*

dropped out in favor of the *story* strip."

BRAD: I guess, probably, TARZAN — that type most appealed to me.

SHEL: *When did you resolve that you wanted to really strike out and be a cartoonist?*

BRAD: After I started selling gag cartoons in high school, I began branching out and I sold to a magazine called GAGS, and other magazines of that type. Of course, A THOUSAND JOKES came along later on. There were many different titles of just plain cartoon gag magazines on the market.

SHEL: *When did you start getting into the "serious money" for gag cartoons?*

BRAD: When I was about eighteen I joined the Navy. I took a little box along with me that contained a bottle of ink, some pens, and some paper. I started drawing cartoons in boot camp. I did some on the local base when I'd have time — I didn't have much time in boot camp — but as I went into service schools, I would send a batch off to SMILES, and other magazines from time to time. I kept my finger in it. I cartooned on every base that I went to. Or, if I went on a ship, they'd want cartoons for the bulletin board.

When I got out of the service, my Dad had a thriving business going. He wanted me to go into business with him. However, he became very sick, and then he died shortly after I got out of the service. I didn't have any desire to go on with a business of that kind. I thought, "My best bet would be to get a background in advertising — so I applied to Syracuse University, and I majored in advertising art and design. I went to work for the University in their audio-visual department.

"He did it again!"

But while I was in Syracuse as a student, I sold my first major market assignment. They call "major market" anything that pays more than $50. I sold to FARM JOURNAL and a lot of other magazines. But the really big magazines out there that the general public was buying — like COLLIERS, SATURDAY EVENING POST, THE RED BOOK, and so forth — I sold when I was a student in Syracuse. And I began to sell to COLLIERS and the SATURDAY EVENING POST. I really hit them good — I really began to snowball it there. The ones that they rejected I sold to ARGOSY and TRUE. By the time I graduated from Syracuse, I had a pretty good list of magazines I was selling to.

I continued working at the audio-visual department at Syracuse. They wanted me to stay there, and they had an art department that they wanted me to manage. However, a couple of guys came by one day and said, "We'd like you to move up to Utica and be our art director for our public relations company." I lasted only about a year up there. That was the end of my commercial art career. I was selling more cartoons without the headaches and the aspects that I was getting in the agency. I could afford to sacrifice that weekly paycheck and go on with my free-lance. So, I broke away and moved out to California.

SHEL: *Were you single in those days?*

BRAD: No, I got married after the war. I was in the Navy and I got married when our ship came back from overseas.

SHEL: *Did being a cartoonist help your courtship?*

BRAD: Gee, I never thought about that. It probably gave it more laughs than most people have. *(Laughter.)* I used to stay up all night drawing cartoons — that didn't go over too well. *(Laughter.) I married my high school sweetheart, Barbara. It was* **Barbara Jones**, at that time. After we were married a few years, we had children — one girl and three boys. Only one boy's in the comics business, and that's Craig. He's in New York

"He's afraid to fall asleep...the puppies keep grabbing his toys!"

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NOW comics

EVERYWHERE THIS SUMMER

"MARMADUKE had rough going at first."

SHEL: *Craig Anderson, who managed the art show at the San Diego Comicons for many years — and now he's with Marvel Comics . . .*

BRAD: Yeah.

SHEL: *It never was a problem coming up with a funny gag?*

BRAD: No, and I figured that anything they didn't buy had a ready market out there of about a dozen other magazines.

SHEL: *Were you always a funny guy? Did you always see the funny side of life?*

BRAD: Yeah, I think so.

SHEL: *That's a gift, isn't it?*

BRAD: I never like to get too serious about things. It gets pretty depressing if you're serious about things all the time. People always seem to have all kinds of physical ailments and illnesses, and so on, so I couldn't see any benefit to being serious.

SHEL: *Do you think that having the lighter approach, and being upbeat, is almost like being a Christian Scientist or into the Power of Positive Thinking?*

BRAD: Power of positive thinking . . . Well, put a little laugh in your life, and enjoy spending your money. *(Laughter.)*

SHEL: *That sounds good to me. At what point did you have your eye on a syndicated strip? What were some of the early attempts you made that failed?*

BRAD: Oh, let's see. They were so dumb, that I'm glad that they never went over — today, I'd hate to try to do them. Some outfit that did up these books for printers . . .

SHEL: *Clip art?*

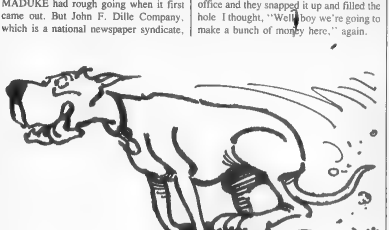
BRAD: Yes. I did a whole series — every year they'd buy fifty-two cartoons. It was called "Words And Thoughts." The top of the cartoon would be what the people were saying to each other — down below would be what they really would be thinking. Up top it would say, "You have a beautiful hat today," and down bottom it would say, "It looks like you have a turtle on your head." They sold these cartoons to newspapers around the country — one cartoon a week.

They also sold books of advertising art. There was a gag cartoon I did once about a little handyman called Hickory. Everyday he was into a different little job. He was out on the job all the time. He had a little truck and he did various handyman jobs. Then I did one sort of like a real funny STAR WARS, called TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. It had these characters who had come back to Earth after the atomic pile had gone off. They find all these artifacts — the artifacts are what we have today. These were funny characters with big noses and feet. It was kind of funny, I thought. Nobody liked it.

SHEL: *Did you do anything with a dog in it?*

"Phil! I think Marmaduke had another nightmare!"

BRAD: I was told newspaper editors don't like comics about dogs or cats. They said, "If you're going to do one or the other, try a dog, because they will *not* take anything with a cat in it." There really was no market in those days for animals, because the market had been saturated by MICKEY MOUSE and DONALD DUCK. So MARMADUKE had rough going when it first came out. But John F. Dille Company, which is a national newspaper syndicate, picked it up. I think the reason they picked it up was that they had just dropped a feature and they still had a bunch of newspapers on the line. They had dropped the feature because they had a conflict with another comic that was almost like it. There was some litigation in the courts about the whole matter. So MARMADUKE came in the office and they snapped it up and filled the hole I thought, "Well, boy we're going to make a bunch of money here," again.



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Maxwell's Lil Orphan
Will Muzzy and Murdock go for a swim?
Is Sergeant Moe the Colossallist Radio Star of 'em all?
Is Maxwell's fatherhood in the bag?
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Joe Sinardi's

MAXWELL MOUSE FOLLIES

NUMBER 2

COMING IN APRIL

from Renegade Press

"My first syndicate check was for $13."

SHEL: *Was this a daily panel?*

BRAD: Yes. The same thing happened with the daily, as when I sold my first magazine cartoon. I got my first report back in the second month — everything's delayed by syndicates — we had eight newspapers. I *owed* the syndicate money this time!

SHEL: *How did they figure that?*

BRAD: After their expenses for the printing — I actually helped pay for some of the printing.

SHEL: *Wow!*

BRAD: I actually owed them money for about six months until I got my first check, which amounted to about $13 I didn't know anything about syndication. I thought, "This is the way it is."

SHEL: *How did you decide upon the name Marmaduke?*

BRAD: The name just came out of nowhere — I didn't have a dog named Marmaduke, it was a name that just — after throwing a lot of names around — seemed to stick well on the character. At one time I thought there was a Lord Marmaduke in England. I was in England at Christmas time to visit with my son. I was talking to some English people, and they asked me the same question. I said, "There was a Lord Marmaduke, and I named it after him." They all looked at each other, and said, "No, there's no Lord Marmaduke!" And I said, "Well, I have a better story." (*Laughter.*) I did have a better story. When I was in Indianapolis, just a few months before that, a guy called me up on the telephone. He said he had a brace of pistols that belonged to General Marmaduke who was a general in the Confederacy during the Civil War. After that war was over, he became Mayor of St. Louis. So there was a famous person named Marmaduke.

SHEL: *I've heard people mispronounce it — call it "Marmandake."*

BRAD: I've had people come up and say, "Mandrake."

SHEL: *Marmalade . . .*

BRAD: Marmalade, yeah. In fact I 'm going to have a girl-dog in there soon called Marmalady.

SHEL: *Oh, that's great. Is this an exclusive?*

BRAD: Yeah. (*Laughter.*) He's got a lot of girlfriends. My daughter has a Great Dane — a beauty — and she calls it Marmadutchess. I thought, "Why didn't you name it Marmalady?" I thought, "That's so good, I think I'll use it in the comic pages. So recently Marmaduke met one of his old girlfriends and they ended up with a whole bunch of pups. (*Laughter.*) Her name was Godiva. Now I've got to bring another girl dog in.

SHEL: *What is the idea behind MARMADUKE? How did you create him?*

BRAD: There was a dog that my mother had. He was a boxer. He was a really, funny, funny character. I was doing a little dog cartoon for SUCCESSFUL FARMING. It was some crazy dog, more like Belvedere is. He would go out — a little boy and the little dog — and they would smoke cigarettes behind the barn together. A gag writer sent me some gags with a dog. He didn't have a name for it. He said, "Why don't we try syndicating this?" Everything jelled together. I didn't think that MARMADUKE was going to go very far because the syndicate could not pick up a big list of newspapers. They sold it to a few top papers, like the Indianapolis paper, the Cincinnati, and the Pittsburg papers — the L.A. TIMES bought it, too. They had a bunch of little papers in Ohio, Indiana — and through that part of the country. It dragged on for years and years — they'd pick up a few papers each year, and they'd lose a few — it went on like this for years. Then they hired a salesman named **Willard Colston**, who's now the Chairman of the Board of the L.A. Times Syndicate He got on a Greyhound bus and started going around the country. He sold MARMADUKE, MARMADUKE, MARMADUKE — all over the country! So within a short while he had a hundred seventy-five papers.

I wrote to the syndicate and said, "Why don't we do a Sunday page?" I was thinking, "If we do a Sunday page — that's where all the money is — I can double my income." "No," he said, "that's a tough field to get into — I don't think you could make it." This dragged on — I would write

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"I detest Christmas. I can't stand it."

him a letter every year for about five years. Finally, one time I thought, "Even if he doesn't want it, I think I'm going to draw up some Sunday strips anyway — I'll send 'em in, and if they can't sell 'em, I'll sell 'em to another syndicate." *(Laughter.)* Just about the time I got these Sunday strips inked up, he called me and said, "Hey, why don't we do a Sunday strip?" *(Laughter.)* So I said, "Good idea, Bob, I'll get some in the mail for you right away." And about two days later he had them in the mail! He probably wondered how I did 'em so fast! So he said, "Great! Go with it!" That's how the Sunday page came into existence.

SHEL: *This is the first time that you had to think about color. Did you approach the color on the page in any special way?*

BRAD: They sent me a big color chart and told me to put a tissue layer over the original.

SHEL: *With a number? Each color had a number?*

BRAD: Yeah. They had about a hundred eighty different color variations on it. They told me to put a tissue overlay on it and pencil-in where I wanted the color with the number on it. I did that. I probably got about five hundred different colors on every Sunday page, 'til I finally realized that I should get it down to about three or four colors. I was very color-wild then. The bill from the place that did all the engravings was astronomical! *(Laughter.)* We changed that in a hurry.

SHEL: *What year did the Sunday start?*

BRAD: I believe it was 1971. Then **Willard Colston** bought the syndicate out. He increased the number of papers that were taking MARMADUKE.

SHEL: *You got the NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS — that's a big circulation booster.*

BRAD: That came later. I was in Japan — my daughter was married to a Navy man at that time, over in Yokohama. I got a phone call at about three o'clock in the morning. My daughter came in and said, "Dad, somebody's on the phone and wants to talk to you." I said, "Can he speak English?" She said, "No, it's some guy from Chicago." *Laughter.)* It was Willard. He asked, "Brad, how would you like to go with United Features Syndicate?" I answered, "Well, I'd been thinking about that, Willard, but I didn't want to mention it to you." He said, "If you go with them, they'll take my whole syndicate."

They took a hold of it and they've just been going great guns since. They built the list up to the point where I think MARMADUKE has 524 papers.

SHEL: *When did you get into animated television?*

BRAD: I didn't really get into it — the syndicate got into it. They have a media department, and they sold MARMADUKE to ABC. It appeared with HEATHCLIFF THE CAT. Heathcliff and Marmaduke shared a show for thirteen weeks. It got bumped off the air for PAC MAN. But I have nothing to do with it.

SHEL: *You didn't write any of the shows?*

BRAD: I went up to meet the people. I didn't feel they wanted me around — they had their own way of doing things. So I just said goodbye.

SHEL: *Do you get a percentage of the money?*

BRAD: No, I received one shot in the beginning and that was all. I don't really know anything about television stuff — it's a whole different world to me.

SHEL: *Do you have a part in the MARMADUKE books that are being published?*

BRAD: Oh, yes.

SHEL: *What kind of a deal did you work out with the syndicate on them?*

BRAD: Well, I have a straight syndicate

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"MARMADUKE is different because

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contract. The ordinary cartoonist's syndicate contract is a fifty-fifty deal.

SHEL: *When did MARMADUKE start being published in book form?*

BRAD: Oh, MARMADUKE was syndicated in 1953. Our first book was a hardcover that came out in 1954.

SHEL: *Oh? That's great! That's fast!*

BRAD: We had a paperback come out about a year later. There were a few other books in between. Then Scholastic picked it up and printed about seven or eight MARMADUKE books. They're a huge publisher, they've printed over four million MARMADUKE books.

SHEL: *Wow!*

BRAD: Those are distributed just to school children through the schools.

United Features has their own book sales department now, which they set up about three years ago. They're in their sixth book — coming out soon from American Library. There'll be an English publisher — I think he has to guarantee to bring out at least one book each year for the next five years. Apparently they sell out as fast as they hit the bookstores. I get people writing to me all the time saying, "Where can I buy a MARMADUKE book?" And I say, "Go to the bookstores," and I give them a whole bunch of titles.

SHEL: *It looks like you're pretty successful now. Were there any hard times along the way in the life of this cartoonist?*

BRAD: My strictly freelance days were the hardest times and, in the very beginning years of MARMADUKE — when it really didn't have more than forty newspapers. It was a lot of work with not too much compensation. After that period passed, and some people got ahold of it who had confidence in MARMADUKE, they were able to go out there and sell it — they just sold the daylights out of it! **Ken Riley** was with United, and he told me, "Boy, I wish I had a lot of MARMADUKE! Every place I go I could sell it."

SHEL: *Why do you suppose this is? Does your fan mail tell you?*

BRAD: People who read it are very loyal to it. It's a comic that people can associate with. They can respond to it from their own life experiences. They've either had a dog, or do have a dog. It's a family situation, it's kind of low key. I've attempted to draw a humorous situation — one that's very expressive through the dog's face, or actions. And people like that, rather than a wooden figure or people talking about the dog.

SHEL: *The dog really lives. Does he talk to you? Do you get inside the dog's head?*

BRAD: The dog's inside *me! (Laughter.)* The dog, himself, is different from most comics because he doesn't talk. He doesn't really do things that people do — like animal features do. Lots of animals in features do all sorts of things, like driving the lawnmower or sailing a boat, doing the things that people do. But Marmaduke is, for the most part, strictly a dog. He sometimes gets into some rather outlandish situations. I think, "Well, I don't really think that a dog would or could or should do this, but I'm going to do it anyway — 'cause I like the idea." You'd be surprised how many times I received letters from somebody saying, "You know, my dog did that same thing — you must have been over here watching us." I receive a lot of letters like that.

SHEL: *One of the charming gags that I remember is when the little girl dresses Marmaduke up in a bonnet and puts him in her doll carriage — he's embarrassed because of all the other dogs' reactions to it.*

BRAD: That's a little human emotion in there that I inject, but basically Marmaduke is a dog. As one person told it one time — a dog must have a lot of human emotion in him — because of the way he reacts to situations. I guess it's me reacting through the dog. But people can look at it and get a chuckle, and I don't try to belabor the gag line — I try to keep it fairly simple. I once read that the average person will give a newspaper photograph or a picture or a comic about seven seconds. If they don't get it in seven seconds, they move on to something else. So I don't try to get real sophisticated. I keep it on a basic day-to-day basis — where people can recognize the situation.

SHEL: *Have you ever run dry of ideas?*

BRAD: Well — not a total thing of running dry, but at certain times of year — I detest Christmas, I can't stand it — I think I've probably done every Christmas thing a dog could get involved in. So it becomes very difficult. One of the seasons I like is Halloween 'cause you can dress the kids up cute and they're out doing things. Even though we've had a lot of problems in real life, Halloween is still fun. Once, Halloween was coming up on my deadline. I couldn't think of anything. I'd been doing these things now almost thirty years, especially for the Sunday page. I wanted something that was colorful and funny. We were beginning to move from Arizona back here to California. The movers were in the house and I thought, "Well, I'll just sit down here with my pad and pencil. Maybe something will come to me, 'cause I've got to have something when I get to California." All of a sudden, it just began to flow. I ended up with enough ideas for the next six years of Halloweens.

SHEL: *Wow, great!*

BRAD: Yeah. So that's how it works sometimes. You can have terrible dry spells and, the very next day, and in the most stupid situation that you can be in, some ideas will start pouring out. I don't know how it works with other people, but that's the way it is with me.

SHEL: *What is your process — from concept to finished strip — for MARMADUKE?*

BRAD: I go to drawing the daily panel just like I did in my magazine cartoons. I rough everything out on a big sheet of newsprint. Then, I take that and I put it on a light table, and put a piece of Strathmore over it, one ply, smooth, slick. I use a number one

he doesn't talk — he's strictly a dog."

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Windsor Newton series seven brush, and I draw with a brush. Sometimes, when I'm into some detail a brush can't handle, maybe a little dog or cat in the distance, I'll use a pen. I'll just pick up any pen I can put my hands on, and do the job. I use Artist Aid grey tone sheets on Marmaduke, and sometimes on other parts of the cartoon. That's how I take care of the daily cartoon, and the drawings.

On the Sunday page, I use another drawing board. I need a bigger lighter board. I draw it the same way I do my others, and I draw quite fast. I can do my roughing extremely fast. When I'm inking, I slow down I've got to keep the tip on my brush. That slows you down. And, I try, because MARMADUKE is reduced in the newspapers to such a degree, not to get into real heavy detailing. I try to give the impression that there's detail. You look at it and you think the detail's there, but if you stop and look closely at it, it isn't there. Your mind is telling you when you look at it — *it is* there. I try to keep quite a bit of white space, and not get a lot of line-work in there. I use a flexible line. I hold my brush about like a person would hold a pencil. I draw faster and hence, widen a line, and then stop it, snap it around.

SHEL: *Do you consciously work at this looseness?*

BRAD: I just got to looking at my older stuff and I didn't like it. I said, "This isn't the way I want to draw — I'm drawing the way I think I should draw. I should draw the way I want to draw." That happened about the time they were reducing things in the newspaper. I thought, "Let's give it a try." Sometimes I still slip back into the old way. When I do, I say, "Forget it — let's get back to drawing it right," because the line-work does all the work for you. Sometimes you create a whole shape or a movement — especially if Marmaduke's running. You could use a little thin line and snap around with a fat line on the back, and shove them right across the page.

SHEL: *Did you ever have anybody assist you on the art?*

BRAD: No, I've always done all the art.

SHEL: *I notice you have two drawing boards downstairs.*

BRAD: One's for my dailies, and one's for my Sundays. I go back and forth. Sometimes, I'll be working on both at the same time. I figured if I had two drawing boards, I can work on dailies, and if I want to do a little inking on my Sunday, I can do it. I'm into two different worlds that way.

Sometimes I'll sit down and start drawing pictures of Marmaduke in very unusual situations. One time, I had him inside of a dog-house, and he's looking out the door. That's a different perspective — inside the dog house it's dark. He's looking out into the yard. All of a sudden, a cat's head came down, upside down, looking in there. Well, that started a whole Sunday page for me. I had the cat looking in sideways, and so forth. Sometimes, just by drawing it, I start to get ideas. A lot of times, I have a Sunday page that's almost pantomime — whereas with the daily, I always have a gagline. If you don't, the editors think you forgot to put the gag-line under it. They'll try to make up one to put under it.

SHEL: *Is that right?*

BRAD: Strange things happen. On the Sunday page, I can work with the balloons, and I can just have a gag line at the end.

The other day an idea came to me. It just shows Marmaduke — he's sitting there looking at Dad and the little boy. You see Dad running this way with the little boy on his shoulders wearing a cowboy hat, running around and playing horsey. I didn't have any words for that. Just Dad running one way, and Marmaduke looking — here they come, back again, that way, and this way. Dad says he's all tired out — he didn't say that, but you know — and Marmaduke goes up and taps him on the shoulder. In the last one, you see him running with Marmaduke on his back. *(Laughter.)*

SHEL: *That's great — charming!*

BRAD: I like to work with visual situations. I'm a great fan of **Laurel and Hardy** and old silent movies — they worked so beautifully with visual ideas.

SHEL: *You've done something extremely difficult by starting off with a one-panel gag,*

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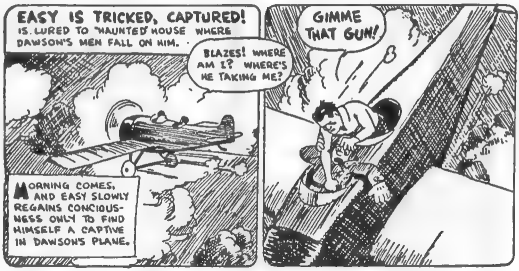

EASY IS TRICKED, CAPTURED!
IS LURED TO "HAUNTED" HOUSE WHERE DAWSON'S MEN FALL ON HIM.
BLAZES! WHERE AM I? WHERE'S HE TAKING ME?
MORNING COMES, AND EASY SLOWLY REGAINS CONCIOUSNESS ONLY TO FIND HIMSELF A CAPTIVE IN DAWSON'S PLANE.
GIMME THAT GUN!

COMING IN MAY.

"This dog feeds *me*. *He's* the star!"

It's hard to put everything in one panel. In a strip, you have the sequence building it up — and then the payoff of the last panel. But in a single panel, you must have the build-up, the middle part and the payoff all in that one square.

BRAD: That's right, it's the whole scene, everything. And you've got to grab that person's eye and make them laugh.

SHEL: *That's a very special talent. Have you ever had any editing problems?*

BRAD: No problems...

SHEL: *You have your own sort of built-in censorship?*

BRAD: On a couple of occasions they've called me and said, "Well, we don't like this word," or, "Could you change this?" Sometimes you get bored. You want to have a little fun. I had this gal from the syndicate call me a couple of times saying, "We really can't do this," or, "We really shouldn't do that." So one day, a couple of months ago, I did a cartoon. I had Dad shaving with his safety razor. The little boy and Marmaduke are watching him. The little boy says to Dad, "Hey, Dad, if you cut yourself can Marmaduke lick up the blood?"

SHEL: *Oh, God...* (Laughter.)

BRAD: You know, I got a call back on that right away, quick. She said, "How could you do this? How could anybody read that the first thing in the morning?"

Now I've got two little grandsons. For Christmas, they got two vials of blood, and they just love it! They put it on their fingers.

I told her, "The kids like it."

"Oh, no."

"You don't know little boys very well. But that's okay, I'll change it."

"Oh, would you? That would be wonderful."

"I'll call you back in a little bit."

I called her back. "I've got a new gag line for you."

"Good."

"Got your pencil ready?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, Dad, if you cut your nose off, could Marmaduke eat it?" *(Laughter.)*

SHEL: *Oooohhh!*

BRAD: She said, "That'll never go." *(Laughter.)*

"Well, okay, I'll call you back again."

I called her back and said, "The little boy is saying to Dad, 'Hey. Dad, Marmaduke's starting an ear collection.'" That wasn't quite so bad, but she didn't like it either. *(Laughter.) So I used up all the gory stuff I could. Finally I got a real simple little gag line, "If you cut yourself, could Marmaduke kiss it and make it all better?"*

"Oh, that's wonderful."

She liked that!

SHEL: *Very clever!*

"When would be a safe time to come back and get my briefcase?"

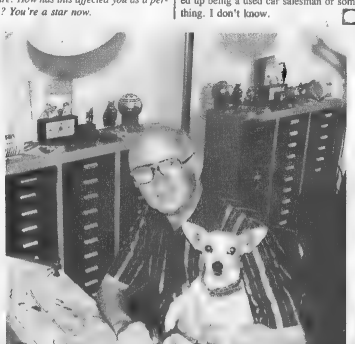
BRAD: But I had a little fun with the editor. Usually my problem with editors editing is it ends up being more fun than a problem.

SHEL: *You're basically kind of a shy guy, right?*

BRAD: Yes, I don't like to push myself out in front.

SHEL: *And yet, you find yourself as a public figure. How has this affected you as a person? You're a star now.*

BRAD: No, no. The *dog* is the star. I work for the dog, believe me. *(Laughter.)* The dog feeds *me*, though. Not many dogs feed their masters. Except this one does. But I've enjoyed doing this. I've enjoyed being a cartoonist. I wouldn't want to do anything else. Especially now, but there may have been times in my life when I thought of going on to something else. Probably would have ended up being a used car salesman or something. I don't know.



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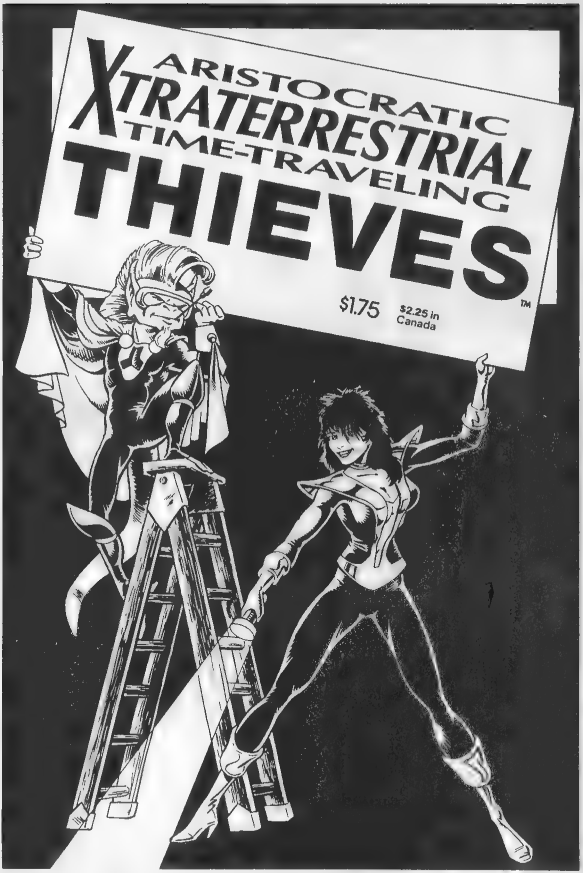

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"A number of things at DC were driving

First Bissette/Totleben SWAMP THING drawing. "This got us the job!"

me nuts — I needed breathing room."

STEPHEN BISSETTE

Last summer I took a job planting trees in western Maine — trees that will be turned into pulp for comic books, among other things, sort of learning the trade from the ground up. When I learned that Steve Bissette would be coming to northern Vermont for Burlington's first comics convention, sponsored partially by Earth Prime, Vermont's best comic shop, I made the seven hour drive to meet him on the steps of the Burlington Sheraton, where I corralled him for a three minute talk, then back to Maine for the rest of the summer. Much later, I caught up with Steve and his gracious wife, Nancy, for a warm meal in their rustic home outside Brattleboro. . .

MARK BORAX: *What have you been up to?*

STEVE BISSETTE: Just got back from a convention in Concord, New Hampshire.

MARK: *How'd it go?*

STEVE: Pretty well — I was drawing my ass off. If I could draw that fast every day I'd be a millionaire! *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *What did they have you drawing?*

STEVE: Swamp Thing was big at this show. Last week I did a shop appearance in Glen Falls, in New York State, and I happened to bring the artwork for GRUMM. Every kid eleven or under didn't care about Swamp Thing — they wanted GRUMM. That was amazing since we're just proposing it now.

MARK: *What is GRUMM?*

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Stephen R. Bissette
Occupation: Cartoonist
Residence: Wilmington, Vermont
Credits: Art and stories for SGT. ROCK back-ups, UNEXPECTED, HOUSE OF MYSTERY, SECRETS OF HAUNTED HOUSE; HEAVY METAL magazine and 1941 — THE ILLUSTRATED STORY (with Rick Veitch); EPIC #2 and #6; BIZARRE ADVENTURES; various undergrounds; BEDLAM; FEARBOOK '86; Scholastic Magazines; paperback and catalog illos.; D&D toy design for TSR; scripts for TALES OF TERROR; and, of course, pencils on SWAMP THING, plus more.
Favorite Comics: DARK KNIGHT, LOVE AND ROCKETS, WEIRDO, TORPEDO 1936, RAW, THE ONE, SKULL, MOONSHADOW, GYRO GEARLOOSE, GROO, MACKENZIE QUEEN, "V for Vendetta," many pre-code horror comics, anything by Miller, Moore, Kubert, Burns, Rude.
Favorite Filmmakers: Sergio Leone, Nicolas Roeg, David Lynch, George Romero, Mario Bava, George Franju, David Cronenberg, Don Siegel, Sam Fuller. Give me a B-movie over a first-class production *any* day!

STEVE: It's a mini-series that **Tom Veitch** and I have prepared, a fantasy adventure, sort of a modern day fairy tale. It's about a little boy whose life is the absolute shits, and all of his anger and frustration takes form one night as Grumm — this large creature that has an emotional bond with the boy, Jay. Anything Jay feels, Grumm acts on, and it goes from there to become a JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH type adventure, which leads to the real heart and revelations that move the book as a whole. . .can't say too much more without giving it away.

MARK: *Did you co-create it?*

STEVE: The basic idea was Tom's, but the exchange started as soon as Tom mentioned the idea — I started the drawings.

MARK: *You're doing the pencils?*

STEVE: No — the whole thing. Pencils, inks, and either supervising the colors, or hopefully my wife, Nancy, will be doing the colors. I'm really looking forward to it.

MARK: *Is it typical of you when you start a new project, to give the writer a lot of feedback?*

STEVE: Absolutely. **Alan Moore** was real open to it on SWAMP THING, and I'm also doing it with **Bill Mantlo** on the CLOAK AND DAGGER graphic novel. I have no problems with ideas — I have strong feelings about storytelling, in particular. But the writers I work with are usually better at structuring the *ideas as a whole*. At this point I don't know how much effort I could put into a job that I didn't have a good exchange with the writer on. A lot of the fun for me is

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"I drove Karen Berger, my editor, nuts."

the co-plotting. Sometimes, with Alan, images that I might have had or John might have had became an integral part of the story.

MARK: *How did you get these images into Alan's plots?*

STEVE: At first, we had to rely on the mail — gigantic letters. In the letters would be sketches, ideas, things like that. When it's a visual idea you sort of have to draw it, rather than describe it.

MARK: *I understand Alan's quite the letter writer.*

STEVE: Oh yeah, but John and I gave him a go! We were exchanging reams of paper among the three of us.

MARK: *Did you get finished scripts in the mail from Alan?*

STEVE: Yeah — very finished. *(Laughter.)* Very full, eloquent, with detailed description.

MARK: *Did he give you art direction, as in a screenplay?*

STEVE: Yeah, except Alan goes into much further detail than most screenplays I've read, which are very cut and dried. Other than the description of the camera angle, it's just man punches man — but Alan goes into explicit detail, not only with the character, but with what books are in his room, what clothes he might be wearing, what mood he wants. Sometimes, he'll open a script with about three or four pages — single-spaced, typed pages — describing mood and density of detail, items that he wants to flesh out the whole story.

MARK: *Some pencillers might find that restrictive.*

STEVE: Some artists find it impossible, they prefer a very dry script, but John and I just loved it. I'd prefer more than I need rather than have to flesh out a story with extraneous things to keep myself and the reader interested. For instance, I did a job for UNEXPECTED #191, when I was first doing commercial work, through **Joe Kubert**. It was a **George Kashdan** story called "The Ouija's Omen" and the whole story began in a trailer and ended at a lake. I was trying to flesh out the story as much as I could, to give it some cohesion, and just adding the lake to the splash page did it . . . **Kashdan** hadn't called for that element. It brought in the unity of the water. With Alan that wasn't a problem, I wasn't grasping at straws.

MARK: *When you get a writer who's doing his job thoroughly you can be free to do the fine tuning?*

STEVE: Right. I don't have to concern myself with the *substance* of the storytelling, I can concentrate on the *technique* of the storytelling, how to tell the story as best as I possibly can — it gives me more latitude.

MARK: *What approach do you use to find the best way to tell a story?*

STEVE: Well, I drove **Karen Berger**, my SWAMP THING editor, nuts! I tended to turn in pages out of order. The reason I did this is because, to me, the best storytelling is very layered. For instance, in "The Ouija's Omen," for the water to work at the ending, I told **Joe Kubert**, the editor, I had to show it *visually* in the beginning. That's something I tried to do even working from Alan's scripts. In the double-part voodoo story, SWAMP THING #41 and #42, Alan would call for certain scene changes. One change, I believe it was a cut from Billy and the cocaine to the exterior of the house the next day, I just allowed it to filter around in my unconsciousness for a few days, until I arrived at putting a pond in front of that scene, so we jump to the pond from the mirror. It's a very subtle thing, but you're jumping the reader from reflective surface to reflective surface, and it makes the transition click. In that case, it's not much to do with the storytelling, but if I'm doing something like GRUMM — where Tom has written this very detailed account of the series — I go back to issue one and add notes which I then pass on to Tom. Notes on where I feel we need to plant visual clues, so that later in the book we're not pulling rabbits out of a hat. For instance, in the second book we began with a mountain lion, and the whole book is set in the mountains of New England. You know, mountain lions — catamounts — used to be around here but they're not very common now. To make that more believable to the reader, on the first page of the first issue, which is set in a classroom, I'm putting a clipping on the wall that the teacher clipped from a newspaper — "Catamounts coming back to New England." The reader won't notice it, but they're going to be more likely to accept that mountain lion in book two.

AND THE SHERIFF WAS TOO PARALYZED WITH FRIGHT TO MOVE AS THE BUS HURTLED DOWN THE HIGHWAY, SAILED OFF AN EMBANKMENT, AND...
EEEYAGH!

Above and Below: Interesting use of reflective surfaces in "The Ouija's Omen." Can you spot the ghost?

MARK: *The subliminal effect of imagery?*

STEVE: Exactly. And it needn't al-

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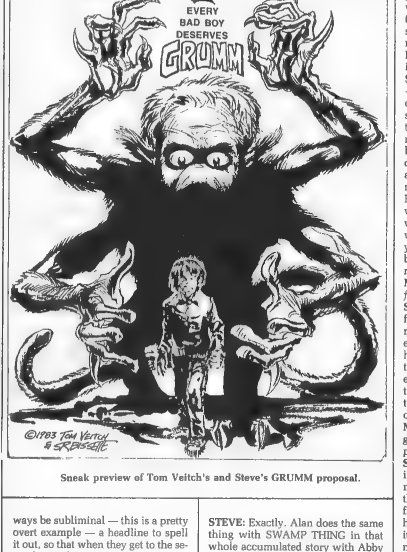
"SWAMP THING readers get chills 'cause



Sneak preview of Tom Veitch's and Steve's GRUMM proposal.

ways be subliminal — this is a pretty overt example — a headline to spell it out, so that when they get to the second issue their unconscious won't trip over the lion, they'll accept it easily. Well, I'm putting that detail in my notes and passing it on to Tom, so that he may include it in his script if he feels he needs to. But whether he puts it in his script or not, I'll go ahead and put it in. This is not going over the writer's head and rewriting something — it's just a minor visual detail, that matters not at all to the writer or editor, I would think. But then, it's the sort of thing I've learned about storytelling by watching films. **Nicholas Roeg** is a master of that in film — what ends up happening toward the end of a story that's layered like that is it begins to explode around your ears.

MARK: *Like a good Hitchcock film.*

STEVE: Exactly. Alan does the same thing with SWAMP THING in that whole accumulated story with Abby and Matt getting back together, and she begins to piece together this change she's been through and what it comes from. Alan sets it up so that the reader makes the connection, rather than his text or our art spelling it out, up until the dramatic moment where it's best to do that. The readers start getting chills down their backs, and it's not because we're showing gore, or doing this bizarre visual stuff in front of their eyes — it's because they're putting the exact same pieces together in their minds. To me, that's a much more vital way to tell a story than the old tried-and-true redundant captions repeating what the picture is showing them anyway. It'd be nice if that sort of storytelling started to proliferate in comics — a superhero story put together that way would be incredible! Too many of them are very primitive in their storytelling, very linear, just not as rich or involving.

MARK: *What about Frank Miller's DAREDEVIL?*

STEVE: I think Frank did a lot of that — look at the Elektra story. All those clues were planted in there, and the story began to gain momentum when the characters **Miller** was writing were no longer predictable, but were entirely true to their actions. The story became completely believable due to the accumulation of details. I remember reading those few books from the Elektra story and, again, it felt like it was exploding around your ears! You were no longer able to second guess what the characters were going to do, you were actually gasping at points because he caught you offguard. How many comics can do that?

MARK: *Might certain comics editors find that kind of treatment too subtle?*

STEVE: If it's done well, it's not confusing. It's still a linear, driven narrative, very straightforward — it's just enriched, told in such a way that you have the reader making the connection. You can still tell it so that every eight-year-old can follow it, but they're gonna find it more exciting than the very dry unemotional form of storytelling.

MARK: *You mean we don't have to go into whole new genres — the superhero might not be dead!?*

STEVE: I want to see the field going into new genres — I think that's necessary — but it's not the superhero that's gone bad, it's what the creators fill it with that's going to determine how effective, powerful, memorable it is. Superman's a key example. I'm not a big Superman fan, but Superman is this incredible archetype. Even though the book today hardly sells, and has been dropping in popularity over the last decade or so, the character still seizes the imagination of people everywhere. All it's gonna take to invigorate Superman is to get some creators in there to refill the old vessel with new water — bring it to life. I point to what Alan and **Dave Gibbons** did with the annual — the best SUPERMAN story in over a decade. It's not that Superman is a bad character, it's not that super-heroes are a bad genre, it's just that people aren't bringing fresh visions to it.

MARK: *What do you think about having Byrne do Superman?*

STEVE: Sounds great — I understand that John is going to be working for

they put the pieces together themselves."

Marvel *and* DC, and I hope that removes the bans on freelancers working for both companies, because I'm about to do the same thing! I don't want to have to deal with resentment from one company or the other. Cartoonists like **John Byrne** might help to clear the mud out.

MARK: *After all, a freelancer, by definition, should be able to freelance!*

STEVE: *Exactly,* but **Byrne**'s been a Marvel company man up until now, and now he's going to be reinvigorating DC — business interests would therefore dictate that he's a turncoat! *(Laughter.)* At least, from Marvel's point of view. However, for **Byrne** it's the best of both worlds. A dream come true — doing SUPERMAN — and why shouldn't he? It's to the companies' benefit for the creators to be true to their own visions, make the characters more valuable, but I don't know if the companies think that way yet.

MARK: *If DC has recruited Byrne for SUPERMAN, then DC should accept in good grace your going over to Marvel for CLOAK AND DAGGER.*

STEVE: Let's see if that's true or not. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *How did that come about?*

STEVE: I won't go into specifics, other than to say that Nancy and I have a new baby. SWAMP THING is a monthly book, but I'm not a monthly cartoonist. Every three issues or so we had a fill-in. It took me about five to six weeks to pencil a 23-page book. It drove my editor up the wall, it drove the company up the wall. So I didn't make a monthly paycheck, plus SWAMP THING did not earn royalties. It may be a critical success, and it may be a prestigious book for DC, but it's not reselling TEEN TITANS! As a result, I was put in the position of having to think of doing a major project. There's no way I could do that and still have continued SWAMP THING. So **Bill Mantlo** gave me a call, asking if I knew anyone who wanted to take over the monthly CLOAK AND DAGGER book. I suggested a couple names, then we started talking, which led to him asking me to do the graphic novel, which is a horror story — Bill knew exactly how to hook my interest! And Bill proposed the kind of royalties they were making on the CLOAK AND DAGGER book, and the money sounded good, the story sounded good, and I was feeling the need to do some outside work, if only so that I could be in a better bargaining position with DC, with the financial need of another child.

MARK: *So your working on CLOAK AND DAGGER does not imply that you won't be working for DC?*

STEVE: Not at all — I'm going to continue working for DC, as long as they want me. As of our last issue of SWAMP THING, #50, it was exactly three years that we'd been working on

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STEPHEN BISSETTE

"I hated drawing horses, so I used an ant

THIS IS AN APHID. A SERVANT BEAST. THE CATTLE WHICH GIVES US MILK.
I AM AN ANT. THE MASTER, DRINKER OF MILK.
WHEN THEIR BACKS ARE STROKED, THESE VERMIN YIELD A SWEET MILK...
SKORK!
SKORM
SKAP
...SO YOU SEE, WE TRAIN THEM FROM INFANCY TO RESPOND TO THIS HERE WHISTLE — WHICH IS HARD, SINCE ALL THEY NORMALLY RESPOND TO IS FOOD!
SKROOM!
ZZWEEE!
...SO IT'S TIME TO PUT IT TO A TEST.
SKORK! SKROOM SKOP
FFFFWHEEE

and aphids. . . My own sardonic manner."

IF YOU'LL NOTICE, AT THE END OF THE RACE-TRACK IS FOOD...
FOOD!
FOOD!
FOOD!
...THE POINT OF THE TEST BEING THE DISCOVERY OF THAT APHID WHO WILL RESPOND TO HIS MASTER'S VOICE OVER HIS OWN MINDLESS CRAVINGS! THUSLY...
FOOD!
FOOD!
FOOD!
SSFFFEEEWWEEE

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"SPIDER-MAN is just as dull as SUPERMAN."

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called Swamp Thing that actually roams around Louisiana swamps.

STEVE: No, but "real" in this case means that the reader gets lost in it, it becomes an experience. Also, we tried to set SWAMP THING in the real world. Part of why the horror genre has been looked at as a ghetto in literature is that it was often done as a period piece, in this exotic setting with people unlike any you've ever met. It's not real. We went to great pains to make Houma, Louisiana look like Houma, Louisiana. That grounds everybody, so once we started revealing the fantastic events, it's grounded in reality.

MARK: *When the fantasy explodes it's more potent in contrast to the reality?*

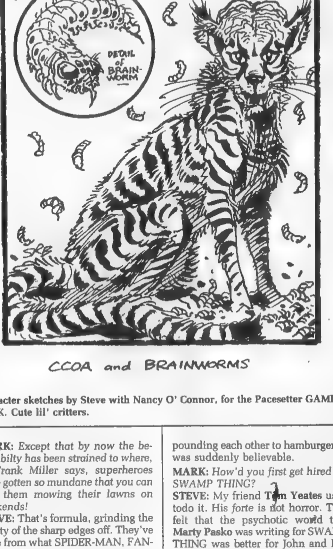
STEVE: Exactly. The definition of the fantastic is the explosion into the real world of some fantastic event. I say "fantastic" as opposed to what the French call the "marvelous tale" — ALICE IN WONDERLAND, where anything can happen. In a fantastic tale, whether it be science fiction, horror, or whatever, it is rooted in the real world. An example of fantasy I point to is TIME BANDITS — they set up a real boy, his dreary life in England. At the point where that knight comes crashing through the wall you could swallow your heart for a second! You absolutely believe it, whereas in ALICE, anything can happen, you sort of take it in stride.

MARK: *What makes SWAMP THING more "real" than SUPERMAN?*

STEVE: In SWAMP THING people die — I mean, it's life and death, characters get hurt, and they don't emerge unscathed psychologically. That's how the real world works, you don't go through a car accident and walk away without a scratch. With most superheroes, this is exactly why much of the genre doesn't work — it's a never-never land. What can you do to Superman? He's the most powerful being on the planet; that in a nutshell, is the strength and weakness of the character.

MARK: *So, twenty years ago, Stan Lee created heroes whose costumes got wet when they went out in the rain.*

STEVE: I remember vividly the issue of SPIDER-MAN where he breaks his arm . . . and those two incredible issues where he's pinned under gigantic pieces of machinery! That's what put Marvel on the roll that they're on now. It was suddenly believable in a way that superheroes had never been before.



Character sketches by Steve with Nancy O' Connor, for the Pacesetter GAMING BOOK. Cute lil' critters.

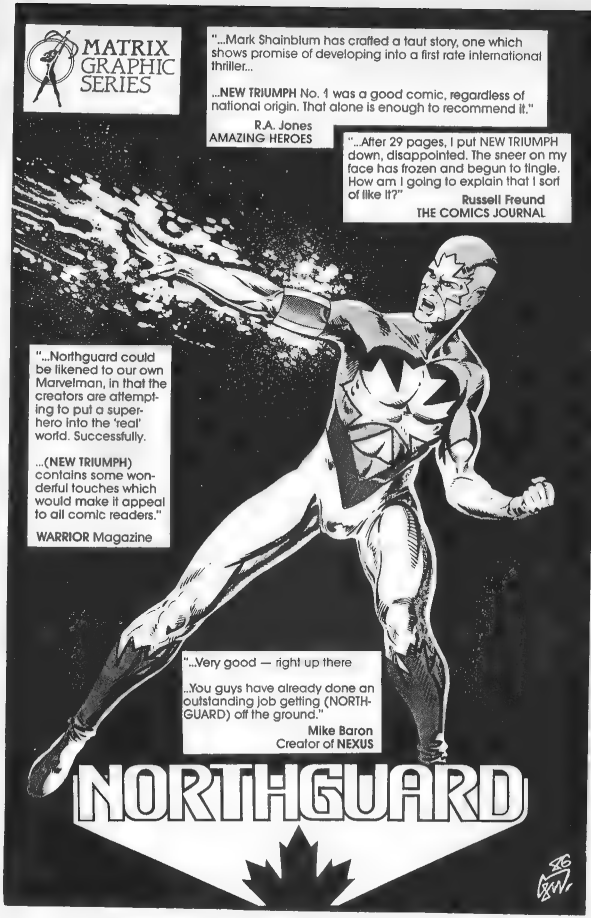
MARK: *Except that by now the believability has been strained to where, as Frank Miller says, superheroes have gotten so mundane that you can find them mowing their lawns on weekends!*

STEVE: That's formula, grinding the beauty of the sharp edges off. They've gone from what SPIDER-MAN, FANTASTIC FOUR, THOR were in the Sixties — when they were fresh, vital ideas — to tried-and-true, hatworn, just as dull as the SUPERMAN stories. They're reinvigorated when you get a **Frank Miller** who comes in and rethinks a character like Daredevil. You get **Walt Simonson**, who comes in and gives Thor back the Nordic roots of his mythology that fed the whole thing in the first place — it's fresh air! **Kirby**'s NEW GODS, when they first came out, were very powerful for me. They were still super beings, but when they fought they demolished cities! People were killed, they had to clear the streets, they were pounding each other to hamburger! It was suddenly believable.

MARK: *How'd you first get hired for SWAMP THING?*

STEVE: My friend **Tom Yeates** used to do it. His forte is not horror. Tom felt that the psychotic world that **Marty Pasko** was writing for SWAMP THING was better for John and I to draw. He let us know — a good two to three months prior to letting DC know — that he was going to leave the book, to give us a shot at it. John and I already worked together on a Dracula story for BIZARRE ADVENTURES, a black-and-white Marvel magazine, and we worked very well together. We'd become friends at the **Kubert** school, we shared a house with **Rick Veitch** and **Tom Yeates** for a number of years after we were all out of the school. Anyway, John and I offered **Len Wein** samples of John's inks on my pencils, and Len said, "yes."

MARK: *How did Len feel about what*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"Len was resistant to our SWAMP THING."

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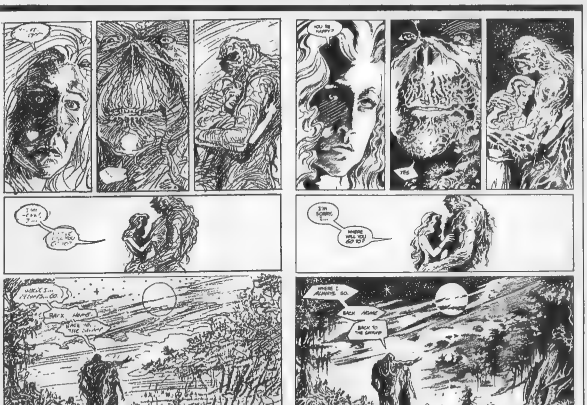

A tender moment from ST #24. Steve's pencils on the left, finished with John's inks on the right.

you and John wanted to do with the character that he and Bernie Wrightson created?

STEVE: He was real resistant to it at first. We wanted, from the start, to do Swamp Thing as this earthy, primal being, not this smooth-skinned root-bound character from the **Wrightson** days. We really wanted to get into the plant aspect. John had done a drawing of Swamp Thing in a bog, overgrown with plant matter, and Len thought it was just too much. But looking at that drawing now, it's tame compared to what we've been doing! Len was resistant, and it took **Alan Moore** stepping in. Alan set up the story, in issues #20 and #21, that gave a valid reason for taking the approach John and I had been pushing for. That's not because John and I pushed our way onto Alan, it just turned out, oddly enough, that Alan had the exact same direction in mind.

MARK: *What's going to happen to SWAMP THING now that the team — broke up?*

STEVE: **Rick Veitch** is taking over as regular penciller, with **Alfredo Alcala** inking. John and I are going into semi-retirement — issue #50 was our last one together. After that, if Karen and DC want me to, I've offered to continue doing covers, which looks like it'll happen. Then we'll do Alan's last issue together again. What John and I are discussing for Alan's last issue — around #62 or #63 — is rather than pencilling and inking as we have, when we get the script from Alan I'm gonna go up to Erie and stay for a week or so, and John and I will lay out and break down the entire story together. John's never had much input on layouts and storyline, 'cause that's what the penciller does. We'll separate the pages and work on them in the mail, exchanging back and forth, both of us pencilling *and* inking, then John will come out here to Vermont for the last week or two, tying up the job.

MARK: *Sounds like a real "bang" finish. I've heard that DC is considering retiring the title after that. Do you take it as a compliment — that no one can follow the act?*

STEVE: I do, it feels good. But actually, Alan has been associated with the character more than John and I — we've made that bed, ourselves, by requiring fill-in issues.

MARK: *Your names weren't as consistent on it as Alan's?*

STEVE: Yeah, but we perhaps gave a definitive vision to what he was writing.

MARK: *Well, comics are, after all, a visual medium.*

STEVE: Yeah, but for the first time, a writer became the key figure on a comic book.

MARK: *More power to him!*

STEVE: So, in a way, SWAMP THING will weather John's and my leaving — but I don't see how it could weather Alan's leaving, for a number of reasons. We set up a visual aesthetic for the character, it looks a certain way, feels a certain way that can be carried through by other artists. However, there's no one in comics right now who's writing like Alan. For anyone to step in after him would be anticlimatic.

MARK: *Why do you think no one's writing like Alan?*

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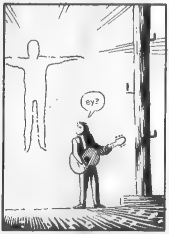
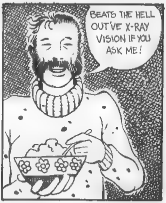


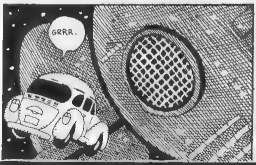
... YOU WERE GIVEN A MAGIC CANDLE AND COULD SUDDENLY TURN KRAFT DINNER INTO STRAWBERRY SHORT-CAKE?



... IT WAS UP TO YOU TO SAVE THE EARTH?

...YOUR ONLY ALLY WAS A SEVEN FOOT TALL ALIEN WITH HORNS AND WITHOUT PANTS?

...YOU WERE FACING A MILE-LONG ALIEN STARSHIP IN A '76 VOLKS?



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MACKENZIE QUEEN

He's been there.

BY BEM 80

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"No one in comics writes like Alan Moore."

STEVE: First of all, Alan is Alan. Now that he's surfaced, you can bet there *will* be more writers like Alan coming in. Secondly, writers aren't paid very well in comics! Unless you're writing a book that yeilds high royalties like X-MEN. Now, if you happen to be a writer who can churn it out, then you're making a lot of money, doing well enough to make a living. But if you're a writer who needs to brood over your stories before you turn them in, lavish sometime and care on them — which is my impression of **Don McGregor**, **Steve Perry** — you can't make much of a living. Writers have always played second fiddle to artists, though they should be paid the same — like with MAD MAGAZINE.

MARK: *And EC Comics.*

STEVE: After all, the artist has nothing to draw, if the writer doesn't provide something. A comic that's badly written and tastefully drawn is as lousy as a comic book that's tastefully written and badly drawn. You get an **Alan Moore** when a guy comes in and *believes* in comics, he's not just using comics as a stepping stone to something he considers more important.

MARK: *Hopefully Alan's success will prod the industry to make itself more appetizing to new writers.*

STEVE: It already has. Hopefully other companies are starting to look at their writers much more carefully, because the next guy in the door could be the next **Alan Moore**. And the fact that Alan's writing comics is going to raise the standards — not only inspire outside writers, who will begin to see comics as a valid form of expression, but also the people who've been writing comcis for 20 or 30 years. Their editors will probably say, "why can't you write like **Alan Moore**?" *(Laughter.)* That will force them to evaluate what they've been doing.

MARK: *From a penciller's point of view, what makes Alan's scripts easy to work from?*

STEVE: He's a visual writer. I've only had the luck of working off of one of **Robert Kanigher**'s scripts — "Dead Shot" in SGT. ROCK #323. He's another visual writer, he knows when to shut off the words and let the picture tell the story, and when pictures alone will not suffice.

MARK: *And the writers who use comics as a stepping stone to other mediums may be more concerned with their writing as writing, rather that as directions to the artist?*

STEVE: Right, the artist is not just a pair of hands there to bring life to the writer's story. The writers who feel that are short-shrifting themselves and their artists, cutting off avenues of creative interchange. It's a visual/verbal medium, each as important as the other. If one's weak and the other's strong, it makes little difference which. Working on **Marty Pasko**'s scripts, there were many things that frustrated me: repetition; saying in the text what is already shown in the picture; multiple actions in the panel, which Marty tended to do quite often — you get an action in the foreground, an action in the middle ground, and something important in the background. Too busy. Plus, Marty liked to use his text to bring a slant to the story that was beyond the pictures — well and good, but when you have a panel with three or four actions plus a text-heavy page, you

You can't keep a good man down: Swampy resurrected, here by Berni Wrightson; following pages — early and *nasty* Bissette/Totleben resurrections.

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"Within the next two years I want to do

don't have a pleasurable comic book! The first issue of SWAMP THING I did, #16, called for a high shot looking down. He mentions that it's very important for the reader to see that the silk in the coffin has never had any weight on it — nothing was ever in the coffin. Now, I can't do that from a high shot looking down! That's a minor thing, it takes a minor adjustment, but when you get an accumulation of these artistic problems you end up spending your time cleaning up the extra stuff dumped in your lap.

I don't mean to pick on Marty's work — many, many other comics writers have their share of problems, too.

MARK: *I hear you've been generating a whole flurry of writing projects, now that you're free of SWAMP THING.*

STEVE: I'm writing quite a few short scripts, which is a lot of fun because I'm able to tell a whole story — beginning, middle and end — in eight to ten pages. I think it's a good exercise, if nothing else. Most of them have been horror stories. *(Laughter.)* After my "Queen for a Day" in TALES OF TERROR #1, I've sold three more to Eclipse, and I've got a number of other ideas to sell them, pending Cat and Dean's approval. Two of them are aimed for this book **John Totleben** and I are doing, which I can't talk about right yet — a horror comic. And some of the other writing is documentation. Within the next two or three years I want to do a book on horror comics, sort of a history, an overview.

MARK: *So you're writing both straight prose and comics scripting these days — is your art taking a back seat?*

STEVE: Not really. The writing has been sort of squeezed in. Actually, I've been able to come up with about one full story a week. It takes me two

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a book on horror comics — a history."

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or three weeks after that rough draft to come up with a tight script — but the writing takes a back seat to my artwork.

Even when I'm writing, it's usually a means to an end that has to do with drawing. I'm either writing a script for an artist who I'd like to work with — in which case, my writing is a vehicle to see what they'll do — or, when I'm writing for myself, it's a vehicle to be able to draw my own story.

MARK: *Who are some of the artists you've been wanting to work with?*

STEVE: I finally got a piece to **David Lloyd** — which was first intended for **Bruce Jones'** TWISTED TALES, way back when. It started as a two-pager because Bruce tended to use that EC format — a lot of text — in some of his stories, with minimal illustrations. When Pacific folded I offered it to **Cat Yronwode** for TALES OF TERROR and she liked it so much she asked me to expand it to a five-pager. That's for **David Lloyd**, whose work I admired since I first saw WARRIOR #1, with "V for Vendetta."

One of the other stories is aimed at **Tom Yeates**. We were hoping to get Tom involved with the horror book that we're doing. Tom doesn't really like horror too much — so it's sort of a challenge to come up with something that satisfies me as a really strong horror story, as well as Tom. In my eyes, Tom's art and personality has always belonged to that **Hal Foster/Al Williamson/Alex Raymond** school of cartooning — adventure in the outdoors. So I came up with a Prehistoric Man story that had a pretty strong dark twist to it.

The third story I'm working on is with my old friend **Rick Veitch**. Rick and I used to do a lot of stuff that we'd write and draw together, but we haven't done that in at least three or four years. It's a junkyard dog story.

MARK: *I understand that sections of the prose book on horror you're writing will appear as articles first.*

STEVE: I'm hoping to get most of the chapters out as articles in magazines. It allows me to at least get the work out there. My main reason for doing that is I'm relying on my own research, and there's not very much information, unless you're discussing the EC comics. So I wanted to get them out there as articles first so then I could benefit from feedback. There'll be readers who'll know more than I do, and then I can hopefully revise each of the pieces accordingly, so that when I finally find a forum and a publisher, the book will be suitable.

MARK: *Now that your tenure on SWAMP THING is over, what kind of art projects are you working on?*

STEVE: I'm having some fun. I'm still taking on a few jobs that are things I really *want* to do. Other than GRUMM and CLOAK AND DAGGER, I've committed to **Mike Baron** to pencil and ink one issue of BADGER, which I'm really looking forward to. Mike came up with a werewolf character, which I'm interested in.

I've pretty much set it up so that I'm doing one job with each comic-book company out there. I have a number of projects that I haven't even mentioned yet, that I'm hoping to find homes for sometime in 1987. Even with my art I'm leaning more towards wanting to do my own stuff, John and I never held back on SWAMP THING — but still, after we'd worked on the book for a year, we'd established a look, and you begin falling into using certain mannerisms...sort of a crutch, which is helped along by the fact of deadline pressures. I'm hoping, with all these jobs, to be able to experiment with a lot of different approaches, just let everything hang out, to play, to go out on some pretty long limbs.

MARK: *So it seems as if your own particular brand of creativity would be stifled if you were to stay on a regular book?*

STEVE: Yeah. It didn't feel like a treadmill for the first two-and-a-half years of SWAMP THING, but the last six months were like pulling teeth. I feel as if the companies and the characters they own benefit more than I do, and that may be selfish, but after giving three years of my life to a character that belongs to DC Comics, and doing well by that, I'm interest-

"No one but Byrne would have been allowed

ed in reaping some of the personal benefits that I can enjoy from my stint, rather than just feeding a character that belongs to this amorphous entity known as The Company. I'd rather channel all that energy into some of my own creations, and hopefully come out of it with something that's a bit more personally satisfying. I feel that we gave our all to SWAMP THING, and now that the torch is being passed on, there's the hindsight to see that even though you gave your all, what you gave doesn't belong to you.

MARK: *It just passed through your hands*

STEVE: It passed through your hands, and regardless of how well or poorly you've done, all that matters is how the book sold. Sometimes, it just seems meaningless. It's not, at all — I shouldn't say that. Because even though we're not going to enjoy the benefits we would have, had we created our own characters and put all the same energy in, still, what we did with SWAMP THING, and the respect it earned for us in the industry is definitely benefiting all of us right now — John, myself, Alan, Karen. It's not meaningless, but sometimes you find yourself questioning.

MARK: *If all creators reach that decision, who will be left to do the company titles?*

STEVE: Look at **Frank Miller**. Frank's found himself in a position where he can not only feed his own head by doing his own characters, and the companies are glad to publish whatever he comes up with, but he now enjoys, like **John Byrne**, the freedom of being able to say "Oh yeah — I'll take on Batman — as long as you'll let me do whatever I want!" And the companies are happy to say "Oh, yeah — go to town!"

It's sort of a cycle that you have to go through to establish yourself. This is something **Joe Kubert** told us at the Kubert School — you have to have a monthly book in order to establish yourself. You do that as one of the people in the team. Even with Frank — he was the penciller on DAREDEVIL and then he worked himself into the position of being able to take over the writing, but he was still a member of a team, with an editor, inker and colorist. After that, he was successful enough to be able to move on to RONIN — his own baby. That's what I'm feeling the need to do now. If I do well on my own creations and the companies are willing to work with me, I'd be happy to take a swing at doing some of the characters that still interest me. It's just that I would need a certain autonomy, outside the constrictions of normal company policy.

I can't see where anyone but **Frank Miller** would have been allowed to do DARK KNIGHT, just as no one but **John Byrne** would have been allowed to take a character as important as Superman and do what he wished.

So I'm at the beginning of the second part of that cycle — and part of that, for me, is working up my writing skills. My drawing skills, I feel I can only refine at this point. With writing, I'm only beginning to get my feet wet. I've yet to write a regular character on a regular basis. That would be the sort of terms I'd feel it'd be worthwhile to jump back on the treadmill for. But I'll have to get there. I'm not in the position where any company would allow me to do that right now. I'm not very studied as a writer — I just sort of shoot from the hip. My friend **Steve Perry** always points out my glaring writing flaws. I'm just beginning to do some real reading. There's an excellent book by **E. B. White**, I don't know if you're familiar with it —

MARK: *Yes, I am.*

STEVE: I'm picking up a lot from that.

MARK: *The best book I've found, hands down, is THE ART OF FICTION, by John Gardner.*

STEVE: Oh, **Rick Veitch** was telling me about that. In fact, I was going to borrow his copy, now that he's done with THE ONE. He said that that was the best thing he's found.

MARK: *Nothing comes close.*

STEVE: And I love **Gardner**, ever since I read GRENDEL.

MARK: *It's like a manual — you need to keep referring to it. Besides comics, I know of your love for film — ever think of writing a horror screenplay?*

STEVE: I have a number of ideas that I don't feel I could do as comics, unless I dedicate a year or two of my life to doing them as a graphic novel or mini-series. But again, I feel a bit betrayed because I'm not a "full" writer — I don't feel I can do justice to them at this time.

MARK: *What draws you to horror?*

STEVE: I love and know the genre. Genre is important because it's a shorthand language. If you go to see a movie and right away you see this guy on a horse with a gun, immediately reams of information from countless other westerns click into place. Horror's the same way, like any genre. The genre is a vessel, a vehicle, with its own shape and form and language. Communicating on so many possible conscious and unconscious levels — fascinating, potent tool.

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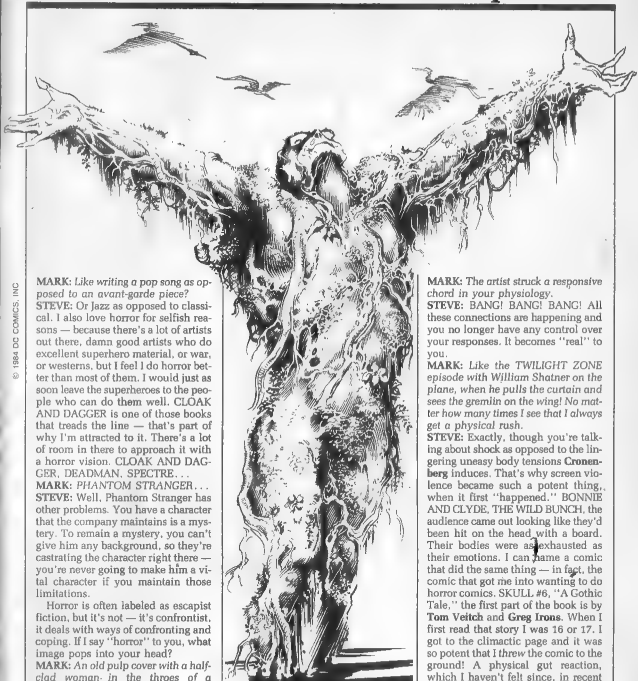
to do what he wished with Superman."



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MARK: *Like writing a pop song as opposed to an avant-garde piece?*

STEVE: Or Jazz as opposed to classical. I also love horror for selfish reasons — because there's a lot of artists out there, damn good artists who do excellent superhero material, or war, or westerns, but I feel I do horror better than most of them. I would just as soon leave the superheroes to the people who can do them well. CLOAK AND DAGGER is one of those books that treads the line — that's part of why I'm attracted to it. There's a lot of room in there to approach it with a horror vision. CLOAK AND DAGGER, DEADMAN, SPECTRE...

MARK: *PHANTOM STRANGER...*

STEVE: Well, Phantom Stranger has other problems. You have a character that the company maintains is a mystery. To remain a mystery, you can't give him any background, so they're castrating the character right there — you're never going to make him a vital character if you maintain those limitations.

Horror is often labeled as escapist fiction, but it's not — it's confrontist, it deals with ways of confronting and coping. If I say "horror" to you, what image pops into your head?

MARK: *An old pulp cover with a half-clad woman in the throes of a monster.*

STEVE: *(Laughter.)* Okay — now a lot of monsters, in their way, are not escapist — they're confronting some sort of sexual repression.

MARK: *Symbolized in the form of the monster.*

STEVE: And horror acts on and speaks to the *body* as well as the *mind*, just as comics engage both the left and right sides of the brain. Your logical thinking is involved with the text, while the visuals act on the unconscious part of your mind. **David Cronenberg**'s films are like that — your mind is engaged but the film also works on this primal organic level. When I first saw THE BROOD, I found my body shaking because the story that **Cronenberg** is telling is tied into biological functions — the body rebelling against itself.

MARK: *The artist struck a responsive chord in your physiology.*

STEVE: BANG! BANG! BANG! All these connections are happening and you no longer have any control over your responses. It becomes "real" to you.

MARK: *Like the TWILIGHT ZONE episode with William Shatner on the plane, when he pulls the curtain and sees the gremlin on the wing! No matter how many times I see that I always get a physical rush.*

STEVE: Exactly, though you're talking about shock as opposed to the lingering uneasy body tensions **Cronenberg** induces. That's why screen violence became such a potent thing, when it first "happened." BONNIE AND CLYDE, THE WILD BUNCH, the audience came out looking like they'd been hit on the head with a board. Their bodies were as exhausted as their emotions. I can name a comic that did the same thing — in fact, the comic that got me into wanting to do horror comics. SKULL #6, "A Gothic Tale," the first part of the book is by **Tom Veitch** and **Greg Irons**. When I first read that story I was 16 or 17. I got to the climactic page and it was so potent that I *threw* the comic to the ground! A physical gut reaction, which I haven't felt since, in recent comics. That's what keeps me doing these horror comics, because I'd like to be able to get that same response from readers. That's a sort of perverse desire in life, I suppose.

MARK: *I know SWAMP THING has sometimes gotten that response in me.*

STEVE: That's why a film like ALIEN or DEATH WISH, when it first came out, had people jumping around in the theatres. In a positive light, the Talking Heads film STOP MAKING

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"Frank Miller and I had the same art teacher."

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SENSE: I can't think of when I've seen another film that had people actually getting up out of their seats and dancing! It struck a vital chord, as vital as a live performance, and I didn't care if critically the film is called a sham, as long as it's hitting an emotional chord in people. We're oversimplifying quite a bit here, discussing only the physical visceral aspects . . . but it's still valid.

MARK: *Like Hitchcock's PSYCHO, which he called his "fun" film.*

STEVE: To him, it was a lark. I remember speaking to **Ben Ruiz**, who now teaches at the **Kubert** school. He'd seen PSYCHO when it first came out, and still to this day when he hears the title, all he remembers is the anger and fear he felt when **Janet Leigh** was stabbed in the shower.

MARK: *Hitchcock said it was his greatest practical joke — it kept millions of American women afraid to take a shower for years!*

STEVE: Thank God he didn't set the murder on the toilet! *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *We'd have a constipated country.*

STEVE: We already do, but I don't think we can blame **Hitchcock** for that!

MARK: *Another funny thing about PSYCHO is that people tend to remember the murder in vivid red color, but Hitchcock used chocolate fudge for blood — the film was in black-and-white!*

STEVE: Yes, and two other black-and-white films have done that. THE HAUNTING, **Robert Wise**'s film of the **Shirley Jackson** story. We went to see it with a couple of friends, and one of them came out and mentioned the scene where the woman who ends up dying and giving her spirit to the house steps out in a dress that she's found. Our friend came out and said, "Wasn't that odd in that scene with the dress, how it suddenly changed to color?" He was so into that emotional moment that he saw color! The first time I saw ERASERHEAD, the textures of the film were so intense that I was seeing sequences in tints of color that weren't there at all.

MARK: *I guess that's when the artist knows he's done his job.*

STEVE: And if you're doing a comic book where the reader is breathlessly turning the pages to see what happens next, then you're doing the same thing.

MARK: *Maybe that's why people call SWAMP THING "real."*

STEVE: It becomes an experience, rather than just another comic. That's why **Miller**'s DAREDEVIL made the impression that it did. And RONIN: I remember the sequence where the woman is in the darkness, and the darkness just engulfs her, and he had a pure black page. It becomes tangible.

MARK: *It'll be great to see what Frank does with Batman in DARK KNIGHT.*

STEVE: Yeah, Alan spent some time with Frank on the west coast and told me quite a bit about what Frank was planning for the last two issues and it sounds amazing! It turns out that Frank and I had the same high school art teacher, back when Frank was also in Vermont.

MARK: *How do the local folks up here relate to a comic-book artist?*

STEVE: Actually, it keeps me grounded — most of our friends here have nothing to do with comics. I like that. I may be an award-winning cartoonist, but I still have to cut my wood and get it stacked before the cold weather gets here again.

End of the line for the old gang — ST #50, Alan Moore's conclusion to his sweeping "American Gothic."

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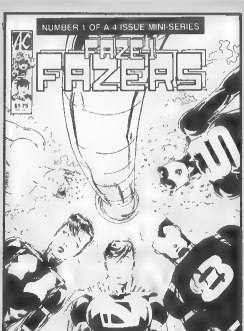

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STEVE BISSETTE'S GUIDE TO

The many faces of Swamp Thing

LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Glimpses of the first SWAMP THING by Wrightson and Wein from HOUSE OF SECRETS #92, 1971. RIGHT, TOP: First look at Wein/Wrightson ST from SWAMP THING #1, 1972. BOTTOM LEFT: Wrightson pre-Swamp Thing Plant Elemental, from a 1968 story that ended with the line "... things of moss will inherit the land." From HOUSE OF MYSTERY #195. BOTTOM RIGHT: Wrightson post-Swamp Thing swamp creature from his MONSTERS COLORING BOOK, 1974.

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GUESS THE ARTISTS! One's never seen print before, and two are really imposters! Give it your best shot before reading any further. TOP: Wrightson, first ST, HOUSE OF SECRETS #92, 1971; Never-before-seen Art Suydam tryout sketch from 1980; Paul Gulacy from Eclipse's ST MOVIE PORTFOLIO OF 1983; Mike Kaluta, cover of BRAVE & BOLD #176, 1981. MIDDLE: Nestor Redondo, second of all ST artists, from ST #19, 1975; Ernie Chua/Fred Carillo, from ST #24, 1976 (written by none other than DAK); Jim Aparo, from BRAVE & BOLD #176, 1981. BOTTOM: Murphy Anderson, DC COMICS PRESENTS #8, 1979; Keith Giffen/John Celardo, from CHALLENGERS OF THE UNKNOWN #83, 1977; plus two imposters: Ramona Fradon/Vince Colletta's masked partygoer from SUPER FRIENDS #28, 1980; masked skating rapist (!) from an unidentified Japanese comic, circa 1980.

TOP: Tom Yeates, first artist on the SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING, from SOTST #8, 1982; Bissette/Totleben's romanticized ST from SOTST #24, 1984. BOTTOM: Bissette/Alfredo Alcala, from ST #41, 1985; Rick Veitch/Al Williamson, from DC COMICS PRESENTS #85, 1985; Shawn McManus, SOTST #28, 1984. Other ST delineators we've not included — Stan Woch, Ron Randall, Jan Duursema/Tom Mandrake, Bo & Scott Hampton, Mark Texiera/Tony Dezuniga, and the unidentified painter of the ST movie poster, along with makeup designer Bill Munns. Future artists will include John Totleben solo, Bissette solo, Rick Veitch, Gene Colan, Joe Orlando, and Michael Gilbert for the MR. MONSTER/SWAMP THING crossover.

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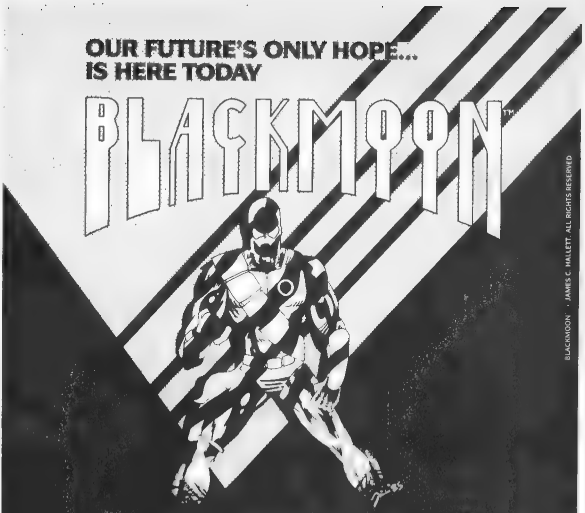

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LAST WORD

Comics Interview 234 Fifth Ave. Suite 301 New York, NY 10001

ROY THOMAS, ALAN MOORE & SOUTHERN KNIGHTS

Dave,

Speaking of the CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS, I hope you get **Roy Thomas** to give his opinion, since the "crisis" seems to have defined him out of existence as an editor. Roy, **Alan Moore** and the guys who do SOUTHERN KNIGHTS seem to be almost the only current comic writers who can do superheroes effectively, without whining and condescending to the material. Every time I read one of the COMICS INTERVIEW interviewees complaining that he can't stand to do superhero comics, I think, "Then go write your novel, asshole." Popular culture is legitimized by its popularity, period. The same can't be said for many of the "fine arts" — take the guy who dropped the I-beams into wet cement at random, for a million or so in tax dollars. The art critics talked seriously about the "work," which is enough to make it "art," I suppose. And is that a massive intellectual fraud I smell in the wind?

COMICS INTERVIEW is looking fine. The old, a-little-too-eclectic logo had a nice run, but I was glad to see it go in favor of a cleaner design. And let me add my voice to those who urge you to keep doing the editorials. Please keep including the varied, comics-oriented caricatures of yourself. A Bat-Dave? An X-Dave? A Bizarro-Dave? A Hembeck-Dave? Glad to hear the magazine has carved itself some territory in the shrinking comics market. Should put you in good stead for the next boom.

Dan Hagen
Apt. 3B
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The resident powerhouse of the SOUTHERN KNIGHTS — Kristin, gets a chance to do her stuff.

...BUT THE GUY THAT HIT ME WON'T BE WHEN I'M THROUGH WITH HIM!
KRISTIN, NO! WE'RE TOO HIGH!
HI THERE! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY GUYS AT CLEAMSON WANTED TO GET ME IN THIS POSITION?
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HEY! PUT THAT BACK YOU STUPID BROAD! I CAN'T CONTROL-

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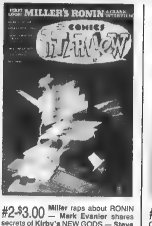

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COMICS, SOAP OPERAS & GREETING CARDS

Dear Dave & crew,

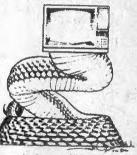
Congrats on interviewing not one, but two fascinating writers this time out. I've loved **Jo Duffy**'s STAR WARS since she began it, (and her predecessor, **David Michelinie**, was the guy who snared me into "serious" comic collecting in the first place). I'm sorry that she's never gotten the sales/aclaim that she deserves for it, and how could I help but cheer her remarks about the "Women's Viewpoint" issue?! (Almost makes up for the **Quadrant** ad, and the umpteenth picture of Ms. Victory falling out of her costume, but I digress . . .) I must admit that I wasn't crazy about anything of **Peter Gillis**' that I'd read before (WARP and issue #1 of ETERNALS, f'instance), but this interview has made me want to reconsider. His words about censorship were right on the money, especially! It's a crazy world we're living in when people worry about comic-book contents, and (VOID INDIGO and its kin notwithstanding) most of them aren't nearly as "suggestive" as, say, soap operas or even a lot of contemporary greeting cards — both of which are at least as readily available to the scrutiny of "young, impressionable" children and their parents as your average comic book!

Keep up the good work, please — especially the fine attention you've given to writers lately. My requests are **Tom DeFalco** (whose work on MACHINE MAN and FIRESTAR deserve better from fandom), **Jan Strnad**, **Bob Rozakis** (his and **Stephen DeStefano**'s 'MAZING MAN get my vote for Best New Comic of '85. May it last 300 issues! . . .knowing DC's high mortality rate on their "alternative" books, it probably won't reach #30, but I've got my fingers crossed), and **Greg Potter**.

That should keep you busy for a while!

Amy Sacks
Deep in the Heart of Jersey

SIMONSON & McGREGOR



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NEXT ISSUE: Marvel's writer/artist ALAN WEISS — the hand behind the world's first hard-hat superhero: STEELGRIP STARKEY! Plus Australian storyboard artist PAUL POWER blasts his way from Hollywood across our sizzling pages! FANTASIA's forgotten forefather JULES ENGEL finally tells his tale! All this and more in COMICS INTERVIEW #33!

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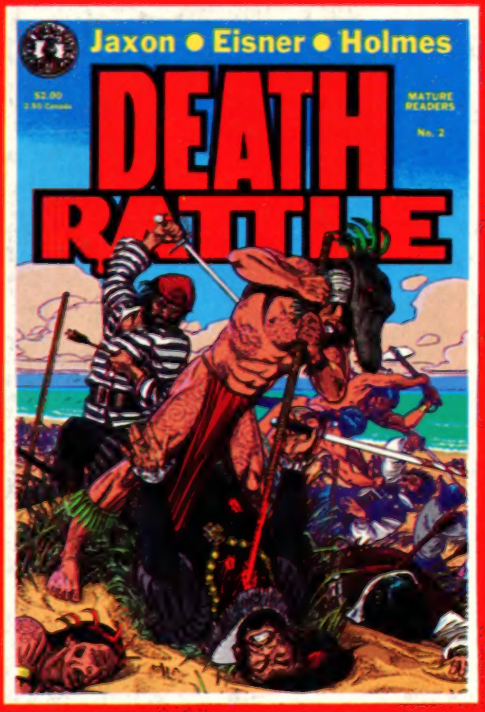

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